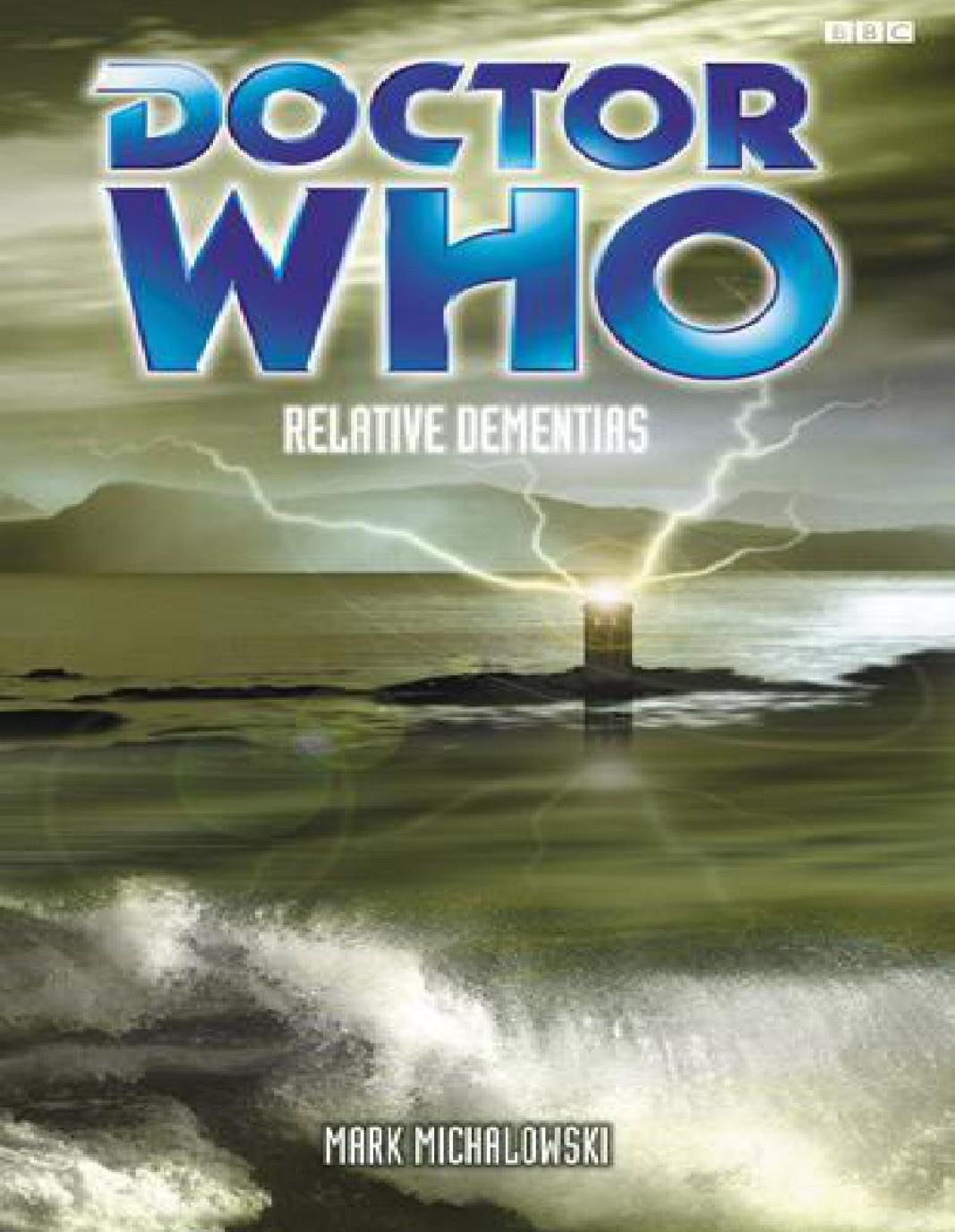


DOCTOR WHO

RELATIVE DEMENTIAS

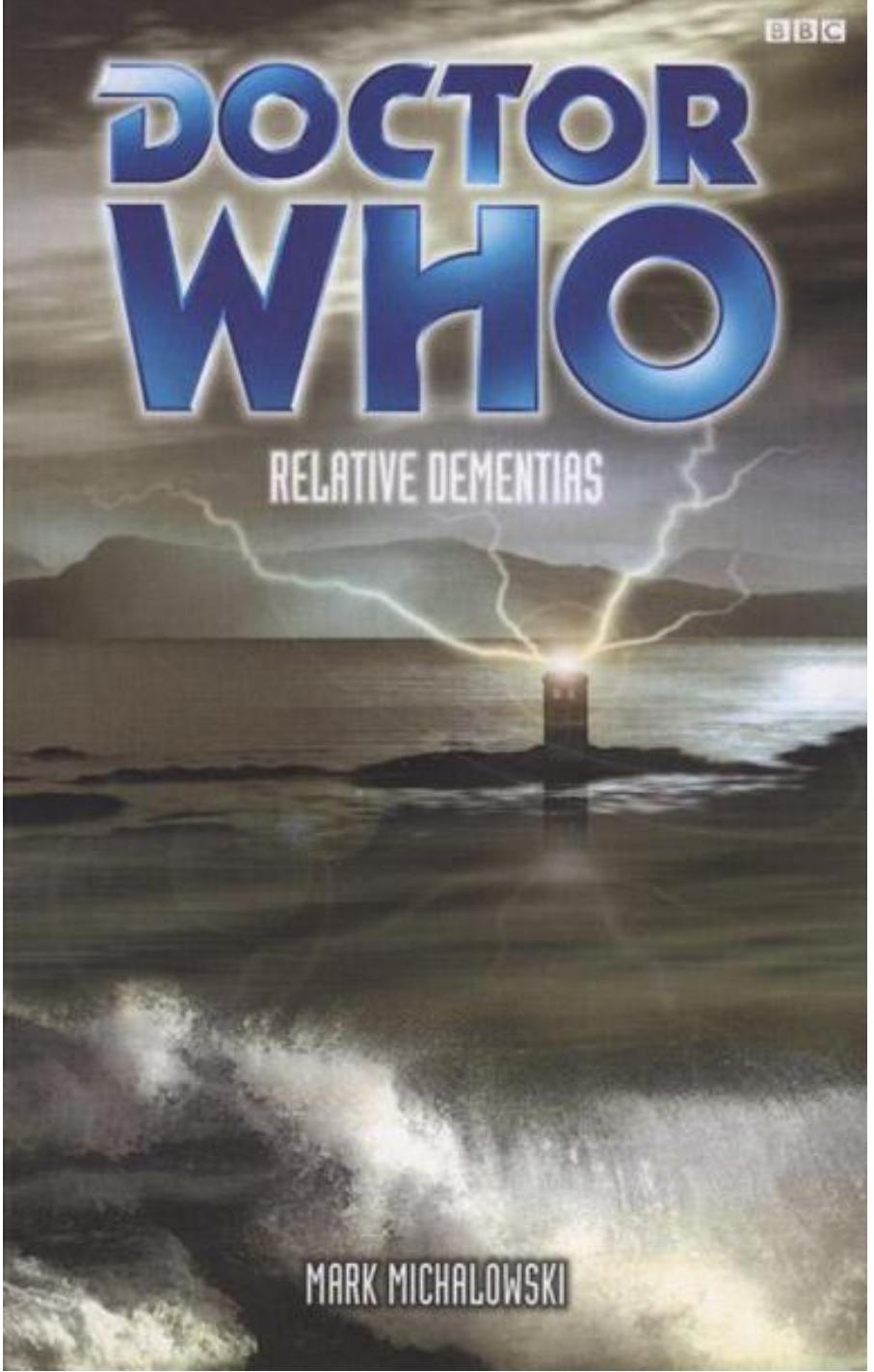


MARK MICHALOWSKI

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

RELATIVE DEMENTIAS



MARK MICHALOWSKI



*'Do Time Lords get Alzheimer's disease?' asked Ace.
'Oh, we get far worse things than that, Ace. The dementias that
plague us are much, much darker.'*

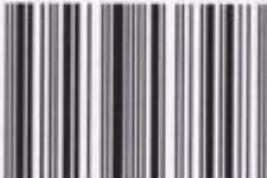
Collecting his mail in the London of 2012, the Doctor and Ace are called through time to south-east Scotland to help out an old friend – an old friend who's vanished. They find themselves at Graystairs, an Alzheimer's clinic and a place of healing, where the patients seem to be gaining a new lease of life. But whose life is it?

Why is the Doctor so reluctant to reveal what happened in the TARDIS before their arrival? Why are cats and dogs – not to mention people – disappearing? Who is the shadowy figure stalking the Doctor and Ace? And what is the secret of the mysterious Miss Chambers, whom no-one remembers meeting?

Soon the Doctor and Ace find out the hard way that actions have consequences – and that there's more than one kind of dementia.

This adventure features the Seventh Doctor and Ace.

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DOCTOR WHO



RELATIVE DEMENTIAS

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Prologue

Hello! Welcome to Graystairs.

Come on in. That's it – mind the edge of the carpet. We had it up this morning – Sadie got caught short here in the hallway and we had a little accident. Yes, you can hardly tell, can you.

That's the thing about patterned carpets. Oh, let me take those for you. Yes, they'll be fine just there.

Bernard. Bernard! Oh, there you are. Could you just.. ?

Thanks, Bernard.

Well, you must be Mrs McConnon. Are you sure? Well it's lovely to have you here, Margaret. And you must be Margaret's son and daughter? That's nice. Did you have a good trip? Where have you come from again... Derbyshire? Not too bad, then.

Come on through into the lounge, we'll get you a cup of tea.

Would you like that, Margaret? Or d'you prefer coffee? Oh me too. Much more refreshing, isn't it? No Bernard, Margaret's in the Rose Room. Yes, it is nice isn't it? All our rooms are named after flowers. Er, no. No actual roses as such. But the bedspread's pink and I think there are roses on the curtains. Or lilies.

Come on through then. Yes, this is the lounge. The residents spend a lot of time down here. D'you like it Margaret? Oh no, sit where you like – whoops, no, not there. Sorry. That's Sadie's chair. Yes. Anywhere else, though. Oh, that one's Arnold's – he brought it with him. Yes, that's right. Makes him feel a bit more at home. But anywhere else is fine.

So tea for all of you? Oh, really? Well I suppose it is getting late. Are you staying in the village? Oh, right, right. Yes, I know.

It is a long way isn't it? Would you like to see Margaret's room before you- oh, fine. No, that's fine. You'll see it on your next visit, I expect. Yes, yes. She'll have a lovely time, won't you Margaret? I'll just let you say your goodbyes then.

Bernard! Bernard, where are- ah, there you are. Margaret's bags are

still here. No, the Rose Room. I told you. Oh, did he?

Well get the disinfectant out and give it a good scrub. Put the rug over it. It won't show. Yes, open the window.

Oh, that was quick. Has she settled in then? Having a good chat to the other residents? Lovely. No, don't you worry. She'll be fine. It always takes a little while for them to settle in. Once she gets stuck into the bingo, she won't want to go home, mark my words.

Well, lovely to see you both, and don't you fret about her.

Your mum's in excellent hands. Like I say, it's like a home from home here. Yes – whoops, just mind that carpet.

OK, nice to see you both. Yes, yes, have a good-trip. We'll give you a call to let you know how Margaret's getting on. Righty ho. Take care. Byeeee.

Well, Margaret. How are you settling in? Made friends yet?

Of course you will. I'll get you that cup of tea, shall I? Sugar? Oh yes, I'm sure we have some sweetener. Watching those calories, are we? Very wise. I'm sure you're sweet enough already, Margaret.

I know you're going to love it here, Margaret. Everyone's going to make you feel really at home, aren't you everyone? This is Margaret. She's come to stay for a while. Now I hope you're all going to be really nice to her – tell her what we get up to here.

Good.

Yes Margaret, you're going to be fine... Once you start your treatment, you won't want to leave us, you know. No you won't... we're just one big happy family.

Chapter One

Repressing a shudder, she stared out over the cold, grey sea, wave-tops flecked with white spittle. Every wave that slopped onto the beach was a reminder of the saggy bag of water she called a body, every drop of rain that fell on her dead skin a reminder of the shape they'd given her. She knew all the facts and figures, climatic data, physiology and biology of the prime species on this world; but still she shuddered at the suffocating wetness of what she'd become. What she'd been made.

Sometimes at night, listening to the wind rattling the windows, she scared herself by suddenly remembering that she'd forgotten what her own body – her old body – was like. And she'd sit up in the darkness, listening to her own breathing. She'd slide the water-fat palms of her hands across her fleshsuit, firmly pressing the spongy tissue as if she were smoothing out wrinkles, trying to remember the shiny slickness of her old skin; she'd close her eyes and picture the slender, twig-like body that she used to call hers. Did it still exist under the mounds of flesh and prosthetics that they'd applied to her, slapped on like so much animal fat? When she looked down at herself, she didn't see the hours of work the modifiers had put in, or the years of augmentation technology they relied upon. Instead, all she saw was ugliness and fleshy wetness. And sitting there upon the cliff, she could taste that same wetness on the wind. It repulsed her at the same time as it fascinated her.

She looked up into the sky and watched clouds scudding past, thick grey ribs promising a storm, and pulled her coat tighter. Away in the distance she could still see the boat, bobbing defiantly on the sea. She wondered what the occupants were doing now. A feeble yellow light flickered in the cabin and the thought of warmth made what passed for her heart surge a little.

She glanced back over her shoulder, down the long, long grassy slope towards the base dwelling, wishing she didn't still have two hours of observation duty to perform. She should have brought the Landine with her – for warmth, if not for company.

The water drops from the clouds suddenly began to increase in size and frequency and she took a deep breath, surrendering to the inevitability of this dreary world and its dreary weather as she watched the waves breaking on the shore. She turned her bulky head and surveyed the surface of the sea again, noting how perfectly the hues of its steel surface matched those of the sky, hanging above her like corrugated metal, bringing more of the wind and more of the wetness.

Soon, she hoped. It would happen soon. And then she could go home – to the warm and the dry, to her old body.

She plucked thoughtfully at the skin around her fingernail. A tiny flap came loose. She wondered how easily it would come off.

Doctor Joyce Brunner was in drag. Or at least that's how she felt in anything other than her labcoat or her UNIT fatigues. Skirts made her

legs feel cold and naked, vulnerable; and the kind of shoes that she was expected to wear out of work made her wince, bringing back painful memories of being a teenager. She'd never been one for twin sets and pearls, and the last time she'd had to dress up – for a UNIT dinner, surprise, surprise – she'd had to borrow something from her sister. Although Alison's taste in clothes was rather showier than her own, she'd taken some small solace in being a full two sizes smaller than her.

Dressing for a civilian trip to the Scottish countryside had been somewhat easier – a quick flick through a country lady magazine had given her the names of a couple of outfitters in London, and a tedious afternoon with her credit card had sorted the whole lot. Not that it was necessary to make any kind of an impression on the staff at Graystairs. God knows, she was paying them enough for her mother's treatment. But something in Mum's own love of decorum – if not stilettos – must have rubbed off on her. Even as she'd handed over the plastic and taken charge of the discreet carrier bags, she knew she was going over the top. It was only a trip up to Scotland, for goodness'

sake. But the gravity of the situation somehow demanded a special effort – a costume for this new and unaccustomed role.

She hoped the staff didn't realise she was wearing the same outfit that she'd worn when she'd first brought Mum up here.

Joyce fumbled about in her stiff, shiny new handbag, checked her hair was still in its tight bun, found the postcard she'd written back at the B&B and read it once more. She didn't have a clue when the Doctor would get it – and, if he did, how long it would take him to respond. If at all. But her concerns were too vague to contact anyone else – apart from Michael, and she hadn't heard back from him yet. Knowing the Doctor, vague concerns were most definitely his speciality.

She paused as she slipped the postcard into the box, remembering the last time she'd seen him: they'd had a lovely, blowy, day out at Cromer, the Doctor striding along with his snowy hair fluttering in the wind. They'd had scones at a teashop

– which Joyce had fought hard to pay for – and had taken the scenic route back to UNIT HQ in the Doctor's bizarre, yellow car. She hadn't seen him since, although they'd exchanged messages and phone calls every now and again. But he'd given her the address of a post office box in London in case she ever needed to contact him. Joyce turned suddenly at the roar of a motorbike, dopplering up in pitch as it

headed towards her. She pulled back sharply from the edge of the pavement as Angus, the son of the B&B's owners, hurtled past, dangerously close. For a moment she wanted to shout after him, tell him not to be such a young lout. And then she realised that was just what her mother would have said. *And we all become our parents.*

She watched Angus sail off around the bend in the road, blue smoke streaming from his exhaust. He was probably no better and no worse than most lads of that age – although she'd heard shouting and the slamming of doors the previous night, back at the B&B. She hadn't heard what it was about. She didn't know, didn't really care. She had her own worries.

Joyce glanced at her watch and realized that she'd have to hurry to get to Graystairs before lunch started. They weren't keen on visitors during lunch. With a last, fretful look at the postbox, she hitched her handbag over her shoulder and set off.

It took her a long half hour to get there – a long half hour in which she had precious little else to do but worry about what the results of her mother's tests might show. A long half hour in which she had to try hard to be the cool-headed scientist, and not the hopeful daughter.

Despite the spring sunshine and the prickings of bright greens and yellows that littered the tree-lined lane winding up the hill towards it, Graystairs managed to emanate a heavy chill. It fell darkly across the surrounding countryside like the events of the last few days. Joyce pulled her new jacket tighter as she climbed the broad, stone steps to the front door. Even the brightly coloured curtains and the red- and yellow-painted window boxes couldn't disguise the nature of the place – a place where ill people came on a desperate pilgrimage to be healed.

How much of that was in her own head, Joyce wasn't sure. Her eyes drifted across the front of the building and she caught a flicker of something pale at one of the topmost windows, someone – or something – that pulled back quickly from view.

The door was answered by Bernard, one of the care workers.

He was hunched over, thinning hair plastered back greasily, and had a vague air of uncertainty about him. She felt a twinge of guilt that she'd placed her mother into the care of people like Bernard. He looked blankly back at her, his eyes small and spiteful behind his black-rimmed glasses, expectantly, clearly waiting for her to tell him

her name again. She did. With his customary lack of charm, he gestured her in, closing the door behind her with a thump. He showed Joyce into the visitors'

lounge – a small room mercifully devoid of the lacy trimmings that infested the rest of the house – and went to find Doctor Menzies. Joyce perched uncomfortably on the edge of a chair, her bag clasped on her knee, and waited.

'What do you mean he's missing?' shouted Megan. 'He can't be missing! Not again.'

Steve shifted his weight from foot to foot, hardly daring to meet Megan's eyes. He'd already sent Claudette and Bernard out to look for Eddie, but no one knew exactly how long he'd been gone and how far he might have wandered. Megan was more furious than he would ever have expected, and if she'd bellowed

'Release the dogs!', he wouldn't have been surprised. Of course, Graystairs didn't have dogs. But then Graystairs didn't normally lose residents.

'Any word?' asked Beattie, wandering through the hall towards the kitchen, a cup and saucer clattering precariously in her hand.

'No, Beattie – now go and sit down!' Megan grunted.

Steve could see that she was holding herself in check: this was the third time that Beattie had asked about Eddie in the half hour that they'd realised he was gone. Connie and Jessie had been settling down for an early-morning game of dominoes in the residents' lounge with him; but when he didn't come back from the toilet after half an hour, Jessie started a rumour that Eddie had died. Within minutes, Steve had been assailed by requests for details about the funeral: when was it taking place?

Where was it taking place? Should they buy some flowers? What music did he want played? And, most ghoulishly of all, could they see the body?

By the time Steve had checked the toilets, and Eddie's room

– and just about every other room in Graystairs – Connie and Jessie were wandering in and out of everybody's bedrooms, asking if anyone had a black veil. It was only by persuading them to play dominoes with George that Steve had managed to calm them down and take

their minds off Eddie's disappearance. It wasn't as if it was the first time: he'd gone wandering yesterday morning, too, but thankfully the woman who owned the B&B

had telephoned to say that her son had seen a confused elderly gentleman walking along the road near the woods. And within half an hour, they had him back. The staff had been called together and given a severe reprimand from Megan about keeping the door locked. For all the use it had been. Steve couldn't help but think that it was the feckless Bernard – he'd had to tell him off about that before.

The front door opened and Steve turned hopefully, but it was Angie, one of the newest care assistants, shaking her head woefully. 'No sign of him,' she said as Megan made a funny, disturbing little noise in her throat. 'Maybe we should phone the police station?' She shucked off her patchwork leather coat.

She was a thin, mournful-looking thing, thought Steve, and to be faced with all this – including Megan's temper – in her first week didn't bode well for her staying much longer.

'Not yet – and you can keep that on,' Megan said, pointing to the coat.

'Megan, it's cold and miserable out there; I want a cuppa.

'Then I'll go back out. Anyway, I haven't seen you wandering through the woods looking for him.'

'I've got enough to do here,' Megan said. 'You go with her.'

She jabbed a finger at Steve.

He felt his hackles rise at the barked order, but he put Megan's manner down to the concern which she clearly felt for Eddie's disappearance. Sullenly, he put on his coat. He just hoped nothing had happened to Eddie: if this was how Megan was with Eddie gone only an hour or so, he hated to imagine what she'd be like if anything serious happened to him. Megan clearly had some kind of personality defect: one minute she was vacuous, dopey and vaguely comic; the next hard, unrelenting and with a spark of cruelty in her eyes that scared him. And Eddie's disappearance was threatening to fan that spark into a flame.

'What did you expect? Hovercars, jetpacs and silver jump suits?'

The Doctor paused to cast an approving eye over a display of antique

clocks and timepieces in the window of a disappointingly 20th century-looking shop. Ace hung back, kicking the edge of the kerb restlessly, as she watched yet another anonymous blob of a car crawl past her.

The future, she'd decided, wasn't what it used to be.

'Well... yeah. Sort of.'

London in 2012 was turning out to be nothing more than a slightly smoggier, considerably more crowded version of the London that she knew. When the Doctor had first told her where they were going, she'd expected a fascinating sightseeing trip, all futuristic buildings and *The Jetsons*, moving pavements and videophones on every street corner. She hadn't expected to land in a dingy multi-storey carpark in Covent Garden just so that he could 'pick up his post'.

She looked up into the baby blue summer sky, heartbreakingly devoid of flying cars, as the Doctor ummed and ahhed in the background, like a maiden aunt admiring someone else's child. There was something strangely *right* about the Doctor – dressed like a schoolteacher in a brown, tweedy jacket and a cream hat, umbrella hooked absently over his wrist, paisley scarf draped almost foppishly around his shoulders – poring over antique timepieces. Ace imagined that if he hadn't been a time traveller, righter of wrongs and universal man of mystery, he could quite easily have been that odd little man who ran the antiques shop on the corner – the shop that no one ever seemed to go into, and local kids were scared stiff of.

The air was warmer and muggier than Ace had expected, even at the fag end of summer, doped with unfamiliar chemicals and perfumes. It felt more alien than some of the worlds the Doctor had taken her to, that subtle sideways shift of everything familiar, everything she expected from Earth. Fashions were recognisable but just that little bit extreme: even in the heat of summer, long coats in billowing, shiny fabric like parachute silk seemed to be in, hanging and flowing around their wearers in ways that seemed just *wrong*. Short hair, cropped into spirals and whorls, was clearly the rage – which Ace rather approved of. She turned to ask the Doctor whether he thought a crewcut would suit her, and found him stepping out of the clock shop, beaming, and shaking hands with the shopkeeper. She hadn't even realised he'd gone inside.

'Right!' he said brightly, tipping his hat back with the handle of his umbrella. 'We'd better be off! Time and Her Majesty's Mail wait for no

man. Come on Ace.’ Something silvery slipped from his hand into his pocket and he turned on his heel and headed off in the direction of Carnaby Street. Ace pulled a ‘what’s the use?’ face at the smiling shopkeeper and trotted after the Doctor.

As they strolled down Oxford Street, Ace felt an inexplicable glow of pride at the rainbow diversity around her. People of all colours swarmed and thronged, bees in a multicultural hive.

When she’d been a child, London had always been an exciting melting pot of cultures and ethnic diversity – and a place that her aunts constantly warned her about, despite the fact that she lived just a few tube stops away. Bad Things happened in London, they told her: the men were rogues, and the women were little more than tarts. Even when Ace’s mother had taken on her first big trip to London – to see some tacky musical, she vaguely remembered – there were still hushed whisperings, mutterings of disapproval. But she’d loved it and been scared by it at the same time, excited to be old enough to taste a little of the big metropolis, but not old enough to have to take a big bite of it on her own.

And now, on an improbably unchanged Carnaby Street, she could taste a little of that same excitement tingling away inside her stomach. Tattoos and bizarre – but hugely desirable! –

piercings and strange hairdos, electronic devices wrapped around the sides of heads or nestling at people’s throats; small touches that spoke of the gulf between Ace’s world and this one. She looked down at her own, badge-infested bomber jacket and black jeans and felt rather dull. She leaned in to the Doctor.

‘Professor, are there any aliens here yet? If there are, I’m not sure I’d spot them.’

Without breaking his stride, he gave a little laugh. ‘There’s us!’ ‘I’m not an alien!’

‘You would be to most of these people. And anyway, Ace, “alien” always sounds such a pejorative term.’

‘But are there? *Real* aliens. Here I mean, in London.’

‘Not openly, not yet. But hiding away – yes, dozens of them.’

‘Cool!’ said Ace as the Doctor paused in front of an unprepossessing

tenement-type building that leaned over them, drowning them in the cool shade of its tatty facade. ‘Is this it?’

she asked, thinking that, as a centre for extra-terrestrial communications, it left a lot to be desired.

‘Oil! Doctor!’

Ace looked around. He’d gone. One second he’d been there, and then...

‘Ace!’ his voice hissed from nowhere.

She looked up and down the street, but there was no sign of him. ‘Here Ace. Straight ahead!’

But straight ahead was only a grimy window, scrunched up clots of dead flies and dust in its corners. Ace stared at it, and realized, with amazement, that she could see *through* it. Not through the glass, not like a proper window, but through the whole building. And suddenly it was gone, and she was looking down a dark, narrow alleyway at the diminutive figure of the Doctor, umbrella clasped in both hands, staring at her in twinkling amusement. She looked around, but no one else seemed to have noticed the sudden disappearance of a huge chunk of London architecture. The crowds strolled on by as if nothing had happened. With a shrug, Ace stepped forwards, feeling a strange chill ripple through her body as she crossed the threshold of the alley.

‘Neat hologram,’ she said.

‘A bit more sophisticated than that, Ace,’ he said, as they set off down the alley. ‘It projects a mild aversion field to stop people getting too close. Didn’t you notice how people were stepping off the pavement to go around it?’

‘Can’t say that I did.’

‘Well that just shows how well it’s working!’

The alley was a cool, still oasis in the summer heat, the noise of the traffic and crowds faded to a dull, faraway rush – muffled, Ace suspected, by something more than simple distance. She felt like she was in the depths of a forest, miles and miles from anywhere. Blank, sad windows gazed down at her; a black cat stared at her snootily with bright blue eyes from the top of three skulking dustbins, springing down as the two travellers approached. It slithered away,

glancing back over its shoulder, to vanish through a broken basement window.

They reached a door, painted dark, glossy green, and the Doctor pressed a brass button in its centre. A moment later, it swung inwards, and, as if they'd stepped into a BBC period drama, they entered the most incredible hallway Ace had ever seen.

A plain white marble floor spread away from them like fresh snow, and a huge, precarious crystal chandelier sparkled above their heads. The walls, paintings, mirrors and furniture oozed ostentation, if not taste, and there was so much gold and glass that Ace felt quite dizzy. Every surface, every object, glittered with light.

'She's certainly done very well for herself,' said the Doctor, appreciatively, gazing around. 'A bit showy, but very her.'

'Very who?'

'Very *me*, darling.'

Ace gawped at the woman who had appeared from nowhere, and who now stood in front of them, cradling the black cat from the alleyway in her arms. Barbara Cartland's ram-raided Cartier's, thought Ace. She looked like a Christmas tree, decorated by someone with far too much money, and no style whatsoever.

She seemed to be in her sixties or seventies with a huge, elaborately coiffured hairdo, studded with twinkling diamond trinkets. Memories of the *Blue Peter* Advent Crown flashed across Ace's mind. The woman's ears, hands and neck positively dripped with precious stones – so much so that Ace wondered how she ever managed to raise her hands above waist level. The cat glared at her, as if reading her thoughts, and Ace felt herself blush.

'Miss Gallowglass,' beamed the Doctor, holding out his hand to her and giving a gracious little nod of the head.

'*Countess* Gallowglass, Doctor.' Her voice was deep and plummy, quite at odds with her birdlike frame. She gave a theatrical little sigh. 'Sadly, Edmund passed away last year. So tragic.' She glanced away and downwards, as Ace just knew she'd been taught to do at some expensive Swiss finishing school. She stifled a laugh at the theatricality of it all.

'My deepest condolences,' he said softly.

Her eyes fluttered a thank-you at him, and she turned to lead them through into another room – this one, if it were possible, even more tacky than the hallway. Even the table lamps had shades like tiny chandeliers.

‘How long has it been Doctor?’ she crooned, almost flirtatiously, over her shoulder. ‘Too long, I’m sure.’

‘You know how it is. The whole of the cosmos to roam in, and never enough time to read the papers, never mind the post.

It’s usually all junk mail, anyway. Anything interesting happened recently then?’

The Countess smiled. ‘Nothing that I can tell you about, I’m afraid. Although,’ she leaned towards him, casting her eyes about as if they might be under surveillance, ‘I’d make sure that I wasn’t here next July 4th if I were you.’

‘Independence Day?’

She raised a peremptory finger to her thin, scarlet lips. ‘Word to the wise,’ she whispered and winked at Ace. ‘And you must be the delightful Ace! It’s a pleasure to meet you my dear!’ She shook hands with a bemused – and baffled – Ace.

Had the Doctor been talking about her behind her back, Ace wondered, or was she destined to become some important historical figure? She’d have to have words with him, she thought wryly, as the Countess drifted away to check the Doctor’s mail. The cat slid from her arms like oil and trotted after her.

‘Professor, that is some seriously weird woman! Who is she?’

‘Miss – Countess Gallowglass? She’s a dear friend.’

He caught Ace’s smirk and tutted.

‘She runs a message forwarding service for aliens, time-travellers. The dispossessed. She’s a lifeline for many of them. I met her just after my exile on Earth ended. She was operating from a Portakabin in the East End.’ He gazed around. ‘She really has done well for herself.’

‘So she’s an alien, then?’

‘Well, bits of her are –’

He hushed Ace with a gentle elbow as the Countess swanned back in, an inch-thick pile of letters, cards – and what looked like a squashed rat, complete with long, pink (and, thankfully, limp) tail – in her bony hand.

‘My, you have been busy, Doctor,’ she said, flicking through them, eyebrow raised archly. The Doctor reached out and plucked them from her. She smiled beneficently as he extracted the flattened rat from his post and laid it on the desk. Ace noticed that it had an address label slapped on its back, covered with blocky writing in purple crayon.

‘Return to sender for this one, I think,’ he commented, as the black cat strolled silkily around his legs, sniffing the air, and eyeing the rat greedily.

‘Beautiful cat,’ said the Doctor, wiggling his fingers in the animal’s direction. It stared at him, unimpressed.

‘Yes he is – and he’s settled in marvellously,’ the Countess replied, scooping the cat up in her arms and clasping him to her chest, from where he continued to eye the two newcomers. Ace stared back, determined not to be outfaced by a spoiled, over-pampered moggy.

‘Tea?’ asked the Countess, watching the Doctor fan through his post.

He glanced at Ace and shook his head. ‘Thank you Countess, but I think we really should be going – this is Ace’s first visit to this time period, and I promised I’d show her around. Anything you’d recommend?’

The Countess considered. ‘There’s an exhibition of Etruscan art at the Southbank – but I don’t suppose the Doctor’s brought you to your own future only to take a step back into history, have you Doctor?’

‘I was hoping for something a bit spacey, yeah,’ Ace grinned as the Countess sailed past and escorted them back through the jewel-box hallway. The Doctor gazed wistfully at a grandfather clock, seemingly cast out of solid gold, as the Countess waited decorously by the door for them.

‘And I hear there’s an awfully good Emin retrospective on at the Archer Memorial Gallery,’ she added as the door opened soundlessly, letting in the grey, cool air from the street.

‘Sounds riveting,’ whispered Ace.

‘You’d love it,’ said the Doctor. ‘All unmade beds and dirty laundry. I blame the parents.’

Ace mimed a *ha ha* at him.

‘A pleasure to meet you again, Countess,’ said the Doctor, shaking her hand. And from the look on his face, Ace could tell that even he was surprised at the weight of the jewellery on it.

‘Make sure you don’t leave it so long next time, Doctor. I would ask you to drop me a line, but if your letter writing is anything like your letter collecting, I’ll probably be the ruler of the galaxy by the time you do.’

He raised a knowing eyebrow. ‘I wouldn’t be at all surprised.’

The Countess returned to her crystal palace with a wink at the Doctor, and the two of them stepped back out in the drabness of the alleyway.

The Doctor was curiously coy as they strolled back up to Carnaby Street, refusing to let Ace look at the stack of letters as he fanned through them.

‘Oi, Professor!’ she complained. ‘I didn’t think we had any secrets from each other.’

‘Time Lords *always* have secrets,’ the Doctor chided. ‘It’s how we were brought up.’

‘Like Catholics and guilt,’ smirked Ace.

‘And besides, half of the things mentioned on these haven’t...’

His voice tailed away as he came to a particular letter, and his brow furrowed. Ace sidled up to him, trying to get a peek, but he angled himself away from her, gave a strange little purse of the lips, and slipped the whole lot into his inside pocket.

‘Trouble?’

‘You could say that, yes,’ he mused.

‘So what are we waiting for?’

He looked sharply at her. ‘I thought you wanted to see the sights?’

She grinned. ‘No hovercars? No jetpacs? No silver suits?’

What's to see?"

The reassuring sound of the TARDIS' dematerialisation rumbled through the ship. After four days of touring around post boxes on numerous dreary planets, collecting the Doctor's mail, their tour of London had been cut short by whatever the Doctor had found amongst the letters he'd picked up in London. She watched him as he set and reset the TARDIS controls, humming something vaguely operatic to himself. He'd slipped into that altered state of consciousness, Ace thought, where he didn't even know she existed. She eyed up his jacket, hanging nonchalantly on the back of the chair that he'd dragged through into the console room. She could almost smell the adventure waiting in that little bundle of letters and cards, calling to her from his jacket pocket. What could be so important that he couldn't let her in on it? Since they'd returned to the TARDIS, the Doctor had barely said two words to her, brushing off her questions with a 'Later, Ace' or a 'Not now, Ace'.

Typical.

For some reason, Ace realised that she was suddenly standing right behind the chair, right behind the coat with the pocket with the cards. It stared up at her, daring her to reach down and –

'Ace! Could you do me a huge favour?'

'What?' she answered, distractedly. She knew she must have had guilt written all over her face, but the Doctor seemed so preoccupied that he didn't notice. She raised her eyebrows innocently.

'The TARDIS library. There should be a book in there about Alzheimer's disease – Beckmann, I think. Can you fetch it for me please?'

'Yeah, sure – forgotten where it is, have you?'

Her joke went unnoticed, and she gave a huff and grumped off to get it.

As usual, the TARDIS library seemed to have relocated itself. The last time she'd looked, it had been somewhere between the sauna and the table-tennis room. Now there was nothing but a blank wall. The TARDIS was having a joke with her again. She looked up at the ceiling and put her hands on her hips.

'Well? Where have you hidden it?' she asked aloud.

As if in answer, a wave of light pulsed down the corridor, an arrow showing her the way.

‘If you say so,’ she muttered, and trotted down the corridor.

Five minutes later, the joke was wearing thin. She felt sure that she’d passed the arboretum at least twice – unless, not implausibly, the TARDIS had two – and was on the point of giving up when she felt the unmistakable shuddering vibration of the ship’s materialisation. Wherever they’d been heading, it looked like they’d arrived. Bugger the book, she thought, and turned on her heel to head back to the console room. As she did so, she noticed a door in front of her that hadn’t been there a moment before. Silently, it swung open, and there was the library, in all its gloomy glory. Ace paused. At this very moment, the Doctor could be popping his hatted little head outside to sample the air of a strange alien world, while she, like a spinsterish librarian, was poking around for some medical textbook. But the Doctor had sent her here for a particular book, and presumably one relevant to where they were going. It would only take her a few seconds.

Inside the library, the shelves stretched impossibly upwards, disappearing past the hanging light fittings, and away into the distance, into the musty darkness. She patted her pocket for her torch – and noticed the lights magically brighten and swell above her. The air smelled of history and lost knowledge, and she felt the potential in the room that hung in the air like static. She reached out and ran her fingers along the shelves on both sides, almost expecting an electric shock as she did so.

‘Alzheimer’s, Alzheimer’s, Alzheimer’s.’ she muttered to herself, scanning the rows. ‘Come on, help me.’

She lifted her fingers to brush the dust from the spines of the books on her left – and there it was, right under her fingertip! She blew a kiss at the TARDIS, pulled the heavy, leather-bound volume out, and headed back – just as she heard the sound of the TARDIS taking off again.

When she got back to the console room, she was surprised to discover that the door was stuck. Ace pushed harder, cradling the book in her arm. No it bloody well wasn’t. It was locked. Or at least deliberately jammed from the other side. She threw the book down with a thump and a cloud of dust, and hammered at the door.

‘Professor!’ she bellowed. ‘*Doctor!*’

There was no answer.

Joyce had got as far as scanning the contents page of the magazine and wondering whether she was missing out on something by never having had four kinds of orgasm, when Doctor Menzies coughed discreetly at her side. Flustered, she shut the magazine.

Doctor Menzies was everything you could want in a doctor –

greying hair, neat, clipped moustache, gentle Scots brogue and warm, caring eyes. She knew it was probably carefully cultivated, but it was no less welcome for that. She'd briefly met Doctor Kale on her previous visit, but hadn't taken to him: he'd seemed a little cold and distant, slightly nervy. Perhaps the atmosphere in the place had finally gotten to him. Come to think of it, she thought absently as Doctor Menzies sat down opposite her with a nod, there seemed to be a marked lack of staff since the last time she'd been there: she remembered a couple of bright, cheery care staff and a smiley – if rather patronising – woman, whose name she couldn't remember but whom she couldn't avoid thinking of as 'Matron'. But none of them seemed in evidence now. Probably just their day off.

Doctor Menzies smiled at her. 'Hello Doctor Brunner.'

'How is she?' She winced at her own over-eagerness, but he appeared not to have noticed. He clasped his hands on his knee, leaned forwards just a tad. 'It's too soon to tell whether the treatment's working yet, but the good news is that Norma is showing no adverse reactions to it. As you know, about eight or ten per cent of patients show immediate contraindications – um, bad responses –'

She nodded sharply, a little more impatiently than she'd intended. 'It's all right, I do know what contraindications are.'

'Quite, quite... Well your mother, you'll be pleased to know, isn't experiencing them – which bodes well for her treatment.'

It'll be a couple of days before we know whether the amyloid plaques in her brain tissue are starting to break down; but we should have some idea in the next 24 hours whether the treatment is likely to be successful. You were wise to act so quickly, Doctor Brunner. The later Alzheimer's is left, the harder it is for us to treat.'

'Can I see her?'

'Of course you can. She's resting at the moment – a mild sedative. But

she should be fine for a short visit.'

He stood up and caught the attention of Bernard who was handing out cups of tea in the residents' lounge, where everyone was engrossed in a news report about the Falklands war.

'Bernard, would you show Doctor Brunner to Norma's room?' 'Thank you, Doctor,' Joyce said. 'You've no idea what a relief it is to know that my mother's going to get better - responding well,' she checked herself, the scientist in her coming to the fore, reminding herself not to count her chickens too soon.

'Not at all, Doctor Brunner. That's what we're here for.'

Together she and Bernard ascended the stairs in silence and walked down the corridor. Bernard opened the door for her and stood awkwardly aside for her to enter. A wave of sadness washed over her as she entered the room. It smelled of roses and talc, just like her mother's rooms always had. On the bed, sheets and blankets drawn up under her arms, her mother lay with eyes closed. Joyce silently thanked Bernard, who withdrew from the room, and pulled up a chair at the side of the bed. She noted the photograph – daughter, son-in-law and grandson – on the bedside cabinet, the same picture that stood guard beside her own bed at the B&B.

She took her mum's hand, gently, and squeezed it, noting the flickering of her eyes under their fragile lids. She had never looked so pale, so thin, so frail. The trip up here – and the difficulties involved in actually *persuading* her to come here in the first place – had taken its toll on her, and Joyce had feared that it would do her more harm than good. Her mother's other hand lay delicately on her lap, her skin and lips almost as blue as the bedjacket she wore. Her breathing was light, as if her body were testing out how it might feel to not breathe at all. Joyce swallowed, wondering if this was *it*.

Her mother had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's a couple of months earlier, and from a gentle, loving woman she began to turn into a frightening, bewildered stranger. Most days she was lucid and Joyce could believe that she was on the mend; and then, out of nowhere, Norma would be found wandering in the street, calling each man she met 'Alf', even though Joyce's father had been dead for over ten years.

And then she'd been rushed into hospital with a heart attack.

Her mum had recovered from the heart attack, but Joyce never really had. Each time she had looked into her confused, frightened eyes after

that, she felt that her mother had died in that hospital bed, and that a stranger now walked around dressed in her body. A stranger that, more and more frequently, had reminded Joyce of what she'd wished for that day.

Tears pooled in Joyce's eyes as she watched her mum's chest rise and fall, rise and fall; watched the flickering of her eyes beneath her thin, veined eyelids. Was this the point at which the hijacker of her body finally got bored with the game and let her go completely? Had she put her through all the stress of coming here only for this place to be where she ended her days?

No. She'd done the right thing. Joyce knew that if she hadn't brought Mum here she might never have forgiven herself.

There was a gentle tap at the door. She turned to see Doctor Menzies standing in the doorway.

'Can we have a word?'

She nodded and dabbed at her eyes and realised, with some embarrassment, that the tissue was soaking wet. She followed him out onto the landing, gently closed the door behind her. He looked down at a sheaf of papers in his hand, and smiled at her.

'I've just got the results of the tests we ran yesterday,' he said. 'It seems that not only has Norma shown no contraindications, but that, in the last 24 hours, there's actually been a three per cent reduction in the plaque density and a commensurate decrease in protein entanglement.'

'It's working,' breathed Joyce, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. 'It's working. It is, isn't it?'

He nodded, still smiling. 'The results aren't normally so immediate, but your mother is a remarkably strong woman.'

For a long moment she felt dizzy, disorientated. The doctor took a solicitous step forward, but she steadied herself and took another breath. Lightheaded, she saw little pinpricks of light around the edges of her vision.

'Come downstairs and I'll get Bernard to make you a cuppa.'

We'll have another chat, and then you can come back up and see your mother again, maybe tell her the good news if she's woken up.'

Gently, he led her down the stairs. And for the first time in years, she realised how beautiful the smell of roses and talc could be.

Ace pressed her ear to the door to the TARDIS console room, and heard the faint but unmistakeable sound of the Doctor's voice. He was talking to someone. She held her breath and listened to him, muttering to someone in the sort of reasonable tones you adopt when speaking to loonies. She heard the sound of another voice, protesting, but the words remained frustratingly out of reach – all she could pick up on was a general sense of urgency, a high, wheedling tone of voice that she didn't like the sound of. She wasn't even sure if it was a man or a woman. Her heart beat faster: there was a stranger in the TARDIS. An invader. Had the Doctor let someone in? Had someone actually *broken* in? Where had the Doctor landed the TARDIS and why had he taken off again so quickly? With these questions rushing around in her head, Ace gave the door an almighty kick, and though it shook ever so slightly on its hinges, it refused to give way.

'Ace! Stop it!' She heard the Doctor's voice, clearer now. He was right on the other side of the door.

'What's going on? Who's in there?'

'Just give me a few minutes, Ace.' His voice was anxious, almost pleading.

'No, I want to know. What's happening?'

'I can't tell you now. I'm sorry. Please... just a few minutes.'

'Are you OK? Doctor!'

He didn't answer her, but the mutterings resumed. She kicked at the door once more before realising the futility of it, then pressed her ear against it again, trying to hear what was being said. The floor beneath her jolted slightly as she felt the ship land; and moments later the TARDIS engines started up again. They were off. Again. What was going on? Ace heard the sound of something being dragged away from the door, and it opened to reveal the Doctor, looking very intense, very concerned – and, to Ace's chagrin, not the least bit apologetic.

'So?'

'Ace, please, there really isn't time for this.'

'You've got time to land the TARDIS, let some stranger in, have a

secret little heart-to-heart and then drop him off somewhere, and you haven't got time to tell me what's going on?' 'It's not that I don't want to tell you. I *can't*.' His face looked genuinely pained, but Ace was too angry to take any notice of his distress.

'Are you being threatened? Is that it?' She looked around the room, as if expecting to find someone crouched behind the control console, pointing a gun at him. But there was no one there. She looked at him carefully, wondering whether he'd been possessed by some alien force, or replaced with a bodysnatcher-type replica. But he was the same little man that she'd just returned from the future with.

'Of course not,' he snapped. 'It was just an errand I had to do.' 'If it's "just an errand",' she persisted, 'why can't you tell me what it was, eh?'

He turned sharply to her and took a deep breath. 'Because it's about something that hasn't happened yet. That's what.'

She raised a querulous eyebrow. 'To do with those letters?'

'Something like that, yes. Oh Ace, don't look like that. I'll explain one day.'

'That'll be a first. So aren't you even going to give me a clue?'

He busied himself at the controls, pointedly ignoring her.

She stared at him, arms folded, for a few moments and then gave a snort.

'Fine,' she said. 'Have it your way. I'll be in my room when you can be bothered to let me know what's going on.' And in sullen silence, she flounced out.

The lawns spread away from Graystairs, neat and razor sharp, dipping down to the lake where a couple of ducks were raucously squawking at each other. On the flagstones that bordered it, an elderly lady in a wheelchair, tartan rug across her knees, was breaking up a few stale crusts to throw to them.

'She's your type,' said Harry, elbowing his companion.

The two of them sat on a mossy stone bench at the top of the lawn, enjoying the spring sunshine and watching Graystairs'

other residents.

'Who?' asked George, thrown by this sudden lurch in the conversation. A moment ago, they'd been talking about the hoo-hah that Eddie's disappearance had caused, and they'd been placing bets on which member of the staff would be made to carry the can for it.

'Enid. There. Down by the lake.'

George fumbled with a handkerchief and polished his glasses.

'Are you sure it's not Sydney? Enid hasn't got that much hair.'

'She's wearing a hat. She's a good-looker, though,' Harry added with a hint of wistfulness in his voice.

'Enid? She's alright – but she's not all there, you know.' He tapped the side of his head.

'George, *none* of us is all there.'

'Speak for yourself. Still, she can't be more annoying than Doris Wesley and her knitting needles.' He shook his head at the memory of the *klakk-klakk-klakking* that was, day in, day out, driving Harry more and more insane. It wasn't even as if she had anything to show for it: she'd knit an eight-inch square in dark green, and then unravel the whole lot, rolling the wool up into an increasingly frizzy ball, before starting over again. There were times when George knew Harry would quite happily have skewered Doris's hands together with the needles, just to give everyone a bit of peace.

In silence, they watched Enid and the ducks, and breathed in the sweet, fresh air. It made a welcome change, thought George.

Bedpan Alley, that's what they called Graystairs. Very nice if you liked that sort of thing. Which George didn't. He wasn't quite sure what it was that he'd prefer, but he knew it wasn't doilies and the smell of pot pourri hanging over everything, trying to mask the smells of age and infirmity and disinfectant.

'Anyway, what would someone like Enid want with a raddled old git like you?'

'I was a bit of a looker when I was young,' George said indignantly. 'During the war, I could have had anyone I liked.'

‘And you did,’ Harry grinned back.

They both chortled at the remembrance of those long gone days – but, if they’d been honest, they’d have admitted that their memories were as much wishful thinking as genuine recollection, although Harry remembered seeing a documentary on memory-loss in old age, and felt sure that it should have been recent events that were all fuzzy, not the distant past. Or was it the other way round after all?

They lapsed into warm, contemplative silence, listening to the quacking of the ducks. George polished his glasses again, oblivious to the fact that he’d only just cleaned them.

‘It’s a shame, really...’ George suddenly said.

‘What is?’

‘That we can’t actually remember *what* it is we did during the war.’ ‘*I* can remember perfectly.’

‘No you can’t.’

‘I remember shooting people.’

‘Who?’

‘The enemy of course.’

‘And who *were* the enemy exactly?’

Harry didn’t reply.

‘See, I told you you couldn’t remember.’ George settled back smugly, reached for his handkerchief, and decided not to bother.

Harry snorted. ‘Well, with a bit of luck we soon will.’

George nodded hopefully, and watched Enid and her hat as she finished throwing her scraps of bread to the ducks.

As the cold metal terminals touched his temples they expanded, living webs of quicksilver spreading out over his skin to form a network of shiny veins. He gasped sharply as time froze around him, and he sank, a stone in an ocean of numbers and symbols.

With a numb, glacial slowness, he realized that he couldn’t remember his own name.

Things swam past him; bizarre shoals of figures, letters, mathematical equations. An icy gale screamed through his body, bleaching out all sensation, submerging him in a white-water river of maths, more complicated than anything he'd ever studied at school. He'd never experienced anything like it before, and it took his breath away. There was no sense of up or down, no direction: everything was simultaneous. A vast matrix stretched into impossible dimensions, and he was just an element in that matrix, interlinked to all the others, yet independent. His perceptions were constrained but spread throughout the whole.

The contradictions inherent in this didn't even register with him: such awareness was fading as the electrodes probed their way through his frontal and prefrontal cortices, seeking out the appropriate neuronal clusters to interface with.

As his consciousness closed down completely, his last sensation was that of cold water, drip-drip-dripping onto his skin.

Chapter Two

The dome loomed up out of the darkness, suddenly just *there* like a sleeping whale, discovered amongst the kelp and weeds. John had expected something, but not this. The sonar – in one of its brief, functioning moments – had given a clean, sharp pulse, something incredibly dense and suspiciously big. Something forty yards below the boat, where, by rights, nothing like it should have been. As he swung the lamp across it, the beam glimmered back; muted and tinted greeny brown by the silt and the algae in the water, the reflected light flashed across him, as if someone inside was as curious about him as he was about it.

He angled the lamp downwards and manoeuvred himself closer to the behemoth. As he reached out to touch it, he felt an odd tingle in his arm, like a tiny electrical current – not painful, but disconcerting. What was even more disconcerting was the matching arm that reached out of the depths of the thing, a mirror image of his own. As he drew closer, the arm likewise reached out for him, until their fingertips touched at the surface.

The thing was slippery... no, not slippery. *Skiddy*. If there was such a word. As though the chromed surface was pushing him away, reluctant to be touched. It was a sensation he'd never experienced before. Like a kitten in front of its first mirror, John moved from side to side, watching his own dimmed reflection, slightly stretched out

like a comedy face in the back of a spoon.

He craned his head back, restrained by the helmet, and pointed the lamp up. The curve of the object faded a way into distant darkness in all directions.

He moved back, sensing the water tingling around him, silently seething with forces and energies that scared him.

Perhaps it was these energies that were making him feel nervous, edgy; not the fact that, buried in the seabed off the Orkney islands was a huge, mirrored hemisphere; not the fact that, as he stared into its glassy depths, it almost seemed to be looking right back at him.

He shuddered, realising how cold he was, and checked his watch – about eight minutes of air left. Just time for a quick swim around the thing. He pushed away from the seabed, the water thickening even more with the flurry of sand, and began to move around it. It was very disorientating: even as he knew he was moving, the featureless surface of the dome gave the impression that he was standing still. Only the odd floating clump of weed or other debris, caught in the beam from his lamp, convinced him that he was actually moving.

Five minutes later, he was on the point of giving up and returning to the surface: he could only get a vague impression of the dome's size, judging by its curvature. But for all he knew, he could have circumnavigated it totally, and be back where he started. But then he saw something on its surface that he hadn't seen before.

A couple of feet up from where the dome (it only then occurred to him that he'd been assuming it was a dome – for all he knew, it could be a sphere, half buried in the seabed) met the sand was a dark, starfish shape, the size of a spreadeagled man.

He swung the light over it, noticing the dull, reflective glint of metal under the thick accretion of barnacles and weed. It looked like a five-legged metallic spider, hugging the surface of the sphere. At the centre where the thick arms came together was a lump, protruding a few inches.

Tentatively, he touched it, poking through the accumulation of marine life on its surface. There was a gentle, tingling vibration, a more intense version of what he could feel in the water all around him. He gave an experimental tug – and floundered backwards in surprise as it came away in his hand: a fist-sized lump, roughly circular, like a large pewter doughnut with a cricket ball embedded in the hole. Seaweed

trailed from it like matted hair, streaming out in the water, and he couldn't help but be reminded of a shrunken human head. With flailing arms and legs, he steadied himself, clouds of silt puffing up around him. He brought the object closer, examining it in the spotlight.

Remembering his air levels, he decided to save the examination until he'd got to the surface. With one last, disbelieving look at the kraken in front of him, John kicked out and headed upwards, into the light.

When the Doctor knocked gently on Ace's door, she was sorely tempted to tell him where to go. But she remained face down on the bed, silently reading some rubbishy teen magazine that she'd found at the back of a cupboard. In the white spaces on the advert pages, a childish hand had scrawled naive copies of some of the simpler words in black marker pen. Ace flicked desultorily through it, trying to find something that related to her own teen life. Not surprisingly, there were no letters from *Disenchanted* and hacked off from *Perivale* complaining about time-travelling old men.

Just the usual boy-obsessed dorks: Dear Annie, *My mother hates my boyfriend, but I really love him and he says he loves me. What shall I do?*

Debbie, age 14.

Get a life, thought Ace. 'Ditch the boyfriend and go travelling through space and time with a weird codger who doesn't tell you a thing he's thinking.'

There was another tap on the door.

'Ace? Mind if I come in?'

'I don't suppose it'd make any difference if I did, would it?'

she muttered.

She was right; it didn't.

Ace felt the gentle pressure of the Doctor sitting at the foot of her bed. She glanced over her shoulder and saw his sad, puppy-dog expression.

'Don't start that,' she warned. She wasn't going to let him win her over.

'Ace...'

'You're not going to tell me, are you?'

'Ace, I've told you -'

'And stop putting my name at the start of all your sentences.'

I *hate* that! You sound like a teacher.'

'Sorry It's just that there are some things I just can't tell you.'

Not yet. Not till they've happened.'

Ace sat up, flinging the magazine across the room. It fluttered like a frantic bird and joined the pile of clothes, boots and assorted rubbish against the far wall. 'And what would be the point of telling me then, then?'

He gave a little shrug and she shook her head.

'It'd be a lot easier to take you and all this time-travel business seriously if you actually *looked* like an alien,' she said.

'Rather than just the man who runs the Perivale hardware store?' he completed her thought for her and threw her a mock-offended look. He reached into his jacket pocket.

'And if you pull out those bloody spoons, I'll slap you!' He withdrew his hand slowly, empty.

'And it's hard to remember that you know more about this timetravelly stuff than I do; webs of time, paradoxes. All that head-screw stuff.'

'I'm not infallible, Ace, whatever what you think I think.'

Almost, but not quite. Ten centuries of time travel gives you a nose for these things. It's not that I don't trust you. It's that I don't trust *me*. I don't trust me to tell you things that I think you ought to know. I need to keep the bigger picture in sight. It's too easy to get so close to the trees that you can't see the wood –

only to watch the whole forest go up in flames because you forgot to put out the camp fire.'

Ace stared at him. 'You haven't got a clue what you're talking about, have you?'

He drew himself up, mustering as much dignity as he could manage. 'I couldn't possibly comment,' he replied, sounding vaguely hurt – and

then batted her gently with his hat and stood up. ‘Anyway, we’ve landed in Scotland,’ he announced, as if it were a natural sequitur. ‘Come on. And no, you can’t wear a kilt.’

He glanced around the room as he left.

‘Tracy Emin would be proud of you.’

‘That’s lovely,’ said Mrs Wesley, leaning back in her chair to admire Mrs Denning’s cross-stitch kittens-in-a-basket (cruelly described by Megan as sounding more like something off a menu). Mrs Denning had run out of blue thread when she’d reached one of the kittens’ eyes, and had used yellow, giving the poor creature a rather sinister appearance.

Mrs Denning smiled appreciatively, and laid her week’s work on her lap, smoothing it out lovingly.

‘I’ll turn it into a cushion for my daughter, Wendy,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘She loved the puppies-at-play that I gave her for Christmas.’

‘I’m sure she did,’ said Mrs Wesley, with just the hint of a raised eyebrow. ‘When’s she coming up?’ She set down her knitting, strangely bored and frustrated with it, and picked up a book.

Mrs Denning’s mouth puckered in thought. ‘Saturday, as usual, I expect.’

‘That’s nice.’ Mrs Wesley opened the book at the silk-tassled bookmark, remembering that she’d put it down a couple of weeks ago when the realisation dawned on her that she’d read the same page at least twice.

‘I expect she’ll bring the grandchildren with her this time.’

‘I expect so.’ She started reading, one ear still tuned to her companion’s gentle meanderings.

‘Did I tell you that one of them’s starting at university soon

– Justine, I think. Something with computers. She’s very clever, is Justine. Very clever.’

Mrs Wesley nodded and glanced up, through the picture window: across the slope of the lawn and the sprawling flowerbeds she could

see Megan, struggling with the handbrake on Mr Eccles' wheelchair. In frustration, the gangly girl kicked at it, and it must have come free, for moments later she set off at a leggy gait in pursuit of the liberated, freewheeling Mr Eccles.

'She doesn't care, you know,' muttered Mrs Denning. The two of them watched as Megan pursued the runaway vehicle, catching up with it just in time to prevent Mr Eccles from meeting a watery fate in the loch.

'Who doesn't care?' asked Mrs Wesley, only now registering that Mrs Denning had been addressing her.

'Megan. I don't think she's really cut out for this.'

'For what?'

'Looking after us lot.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Mrs Wesley. 'She does a lovely impersonation of Shirley Bassey, you know, on cabaret nights.'

Mrs Denning turned sharply. She was trying to disentangle a knotted ball of embroidery silks. 'What?' she snapped, totally confused.

'Megan,' said Mrs Wesley, not looking up, flipping the page backwards and forwards and wondering if there was one missing. 'Shirley Bassey.'

'Where?'

Mrs Wesley finally looked up from her book. 'I think it's time for your medication, dear. I'd better call her.'

'Who?'

With a sigh born of several weeks in close captivity with Mrs Denning, Mrs Wesley closed her book, placing the bookmark precisely up against the gutter of the page. 'Shirley Bassey, dear.'

Shirley Bassey.'

Alexander leaned over the railing at the edge of the boat, relieved that he could still see the bubbles from John's scuba equipment.

He'd argued with his brother about doing a dive so late in the day, but after the first week John hadn't wanted to waste any more time.

Moby, the cable-operated floating camera that John had built, had failed almost as soon as it had been dropped into the water – some sort of static discharge that also meant the boat's handrail was a frequent source of electric shocks. They had accumulated so little data on the marine species in the area that John was dreading returning to Professor Quail with nothing to show for the not-inconsiderable sums that had been spent on this trip. Alexander was less concerned. He hadn't really wanted to come anyway: it had only been because his mother kept going on and on about it that he'd agreed to accompany his brother. He'd always wanted to see the world of course, but the cold misery of the Orkneys was only strengthening his reserve to go somewhere hot and sunny. And dry.

He gave a start as John surfaced, splashing and thrashing about. He panicked, thinking that something was wrong, until he saw John's raised arm, fingers formed into a circle. OK. As John trod water and began to move towards the boat, Alexander could see that his clumsy swimming was caused by the fact that he had something in his other hand. Alexander rushed to the head of the ladder and threw the lifebelt out to his brother. He leaned over and took the object from John as he grabbed the lowermost rungs and began hauling himself up.

It was heavy – a lot heavier than it looked. Matted in seaweed and barnacles and dripping with water, it was about the size of a house brick, but roughly ovoid. Through the tangle of vegetation that clung to it, he could make out the glint of metal.

John heaved himself onto the deck, pulled off his mask and peeled back the suit around his head.

'Bloody hell, that was cold!'

He shook his head, spattering Alexander with cold, salty droplets. In the light of the lamp, swinging from the roof above them, they pulled at the weeds on John's find, casting them back into the sea. It was revealed to be a chunky ball, dull gunmetal grey, set in the centre of a narrower doughnut made of the same metal.

'Strange,' whispered Alexander, prising off the barnacles that had clustered on its surface.

'Yeah – and there was more of that static.' John shook his hand in emphasis. 'Come on downstairs. I want to get out of this gear. You won't believe what else is down there. Let me get out of this suit and

I'll tell you.'

The two of them clattered down the wooden stairs, and whilst John headed for the cabin to change, Alexander placed the object gingerly on the table, clearing aside the gutted remains of Moby.

'So what are you supposed to be?' he said to the thing. It sat there, wet and inert, tipped over on its side. He tilted it carefully with a biro, remembering what John had said about the static shock. He rooted around for a screwdriver and scratched gently at the pewter-like surface. It marked surprisingly easily. But as he watched, the scratch faded away – as if the metal had spread to fill it.

'Weirder and weirder.'

'What's weirder and weirder?'

John came out of the cabin, pulling a black jumper over his head and reaching for the packet of cigarettes on the bench beside him. He lit one as Alexander told him about the scratch.

'Where did you find it?' asked Alexander.

John blew out a cloud of smoke and gave a short laugh.

'That's the *really* odd thing. There's something else down there – something huge. Too big for the spotlamp to show it properly.'

All I could see was a great big dome, something like that. And this was fastened to it, sort of plugged into the side.'

Alexander stared at him. 'And you unplugged it *why*, exactly?'

'Because, smart-arse, that thing is probably what's scared all the fish away. And this–' he tapped the device with the biro, ' –

might give us a clue as to what it is.'

'What?' Alexander said. 'Like pulling out the firing pin of a grenade and looking at it gives you a clue as to what the grenade's going to do next?'

The tea was half cold. And stewed. And against her instructions, Bernard had put sugar in it.

But it didn't matter. It looked like her mother was going to be OK, but

Joyce felt like she was waiting for permission to smile. Months of worrying and fretting couldn't just be wiped out by a few vague words of comfort. She had to try not to get her hopes up too much. Nothing was certain anymore.

But still...

She looked around for a member of staff, intending to follow Gray-stairs' protocol and ask someone to show her to her mum's room. But they all seemed to be busy. Megan had vanished completely, and she could see Bernard struggling to take a pair of scissors and a magazine away from one of the residents. The man protested, his face crumpling like a child's, and tucked his hands under his armpits in a disturbing reflection of a tantrum. She put the cup and saucer down on the table, glanced round once more, and headed out into the hallway and up the stairs. Soon, she found herself at her mother's door. In the centre of it was a small porcelain plaque bearing the words *The Peonie Room* in an irritatingly fussy script. She turned the handle and pushed the door open.

For a moment, she thought her mother had got up and was sitting on the bed. She opened her mouth, the good news bubbling out of her. But as the figure turned, the words clotted in her throat. Thin and white, hairless like some dwarfish, Tolkien-esque figure that had ascended from its subterranean lair, the man parted pale lips and a hiss emerged, like the snarl of a cornered cat. She had a brief impression of papery, ivory skin, somehow ratlike, and tiny pink eyes in milk white corneas. The man was holding a slim, chromed cylinder, aiming it at her mother's face.

'What's going on?' she demanded.

The man's eyes flicked to her side, and only then did Joyce realise that there was a fourth person in the room.

As she turned, something thumped into the base of her skull and the room slammed up in her face. She was sent spinning down into darkness and silence.

The Doctor breathed deeply as Ace tumbled out of the TARDIS

behind him. In front of them, basking in the bright spring sun, was the Dumfries village of Muirbridge. At least that's where Ace had been assured they were – not that she really trusted him, of course. The greens and purples of heathers spread away, down into the crook of the valley where the village nestled at the crossroads of two skewed

country roads. The sky was almost cloudless and a pale, duck-egg blue.

‘Very picturesque,’ exclaimed Ace dubiously, clouds of steamy breath forming in front of her face. ‘A bit cold, though.’

‘That’s because this is April, 1982, eight o’clock in the morning, and we’ve just come from August, 2012, just after lunchtime. Do try to keep up, Ace.’ His tone was dark and irritated, and Ace noticed how he was avoiding looking her in the eye. So he should, she thought. The mention of lunchtime had set her stomach rumbling, and she wondered if her body had forgotten that she’d had fish and chips in London just before they’d left.

He shut the TARDIS door behind them as Ace hoiked her rucksack onto her shoulder. She glanced back at the Doctor, and noticed him looking around in an absent-minded-professor sort of way, as if he’d lost something.

‘Doctor?’

‘Yes, yes,’ he snapped back. ‘I’m coming.’

‘No need to bite my head off!’

He sighed and dredged up a fairly poor imitation of a smile.

‘Up for a little stroll?’ he said with a rather forced jollity, rolling his *r*s as if getting in practice for later. He strode off ahead of her, umbrella swinging on his arm, one hand clasped to his hat as the wind struggled to snatch it from him.

‘So what are we looking for, then? Alien invasion? Mad scientists? Spatial anomaly?’ She caught up with him after about ten yards.

‘Yes, yes, I expect so. But first there’s something more important to attend to.’

‘Which is...?’

‘A nice cup of tea and a good fry-up.’

Behind them, back up on the hillside, and just a few hundred yards from where the stocky blue shape of the TARDIS stood, a slender figure dragged itself painfully up from the shelter of the heather and watched the departing figures. Its eyes were bright and knowing:

perfect timing, it thought, and sank silently back into the heather.

The village of Muirbridge was as peaceful and picture-postcard as it had looked from up on the hillside. A scattering of tiny, whitewashed shops and houses, a village green, and the few locals they'd seen had, bizarrely, resembled extras from an Agatha Christie. Ace gave the Doctor a sideways glance as they strode into the village, past a stark, grey war memorial and onto the main street.

'1982 you said? Are you sure?'

'Trust me, Ace. Not everywhere in the world in 1982 shares Perivale's cutting-edge taste in rah-rah skirts and eyeshadow.'

They passed a couple of young men in jeans – farm workers, Ace supposed – who smiled at her and once at a safe distance gave her a low whistle. The Doctor had to restrain Ace from shouting something back at them. The Doctor's unerring nose for a pot of English breakfast had, unfortunately, erred. As Ace reached out for the door handle of the tea-shop, the Doctor pointed at a handwritten sign on the door and his face fell. *Open 10.00am-4.00pm.*

'Cheer up, Professor – you might be able to get a cuppa at the pub.' She pointed down the street to where a sign, decorated with a painting of two little fox cubs peering out of a hole in the ground, flapped lazily to and fro, catching the morning sunshine.

'But then a pub's not likely to be open yet either, is it?'

'Highly unlikely. In that case, perhaps we should kill two birds with one stone and see if we're in time for breakfast somewhere else.'

'Where?'

'At Joyce's hotel.'

'Right.' Ace looked at him dubiously. 'Is this the point where you finally decide that I should be let in on things?'

'The big picture, Ace. Remember the big picture.' He paused and patted his breast pocket. 'One of the postcards I picked up from the Countess was from an old friend of mine. Joyce Brunner. One of UNIT'S top physicists. From what I can gather, she's here with her mother.'

'On holiday?'

‘On a mercy mission. Her mother’s suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, and Joyce has her booked into Graystairs, a local Alzheimer’s treatment clinic. And she’s worried about something.’

‘Don’t suppose she actually said what it was, did she?’

‘No, I’m afraid she didn’t.’ He smiled brightly at her. ‘But that’s what we’re here to find out, isn’t it?’

Joyce’s card had told the Doctor the name of her B&B, and after politely enquiring of an elderly lady with a shopping trolley that clinked and clattered like it was full of empty bottles, they found it, out on the edge of the village. Set in a small, tidy garden of neatly-trimmed box hedges – and one rather lopsided topiary dog – the B&B radiated an air of quiet calm that Ace found intensely irritating, but which the Doctor seemed to appreciate.

An unfeasibly clean welcome mat greeted them at the door as the Doctor rang the bell.

A bright little woman in her fifties, dressed in a blue overall, answered the door with a cheery smile, beckoning them in.

‘Beautiful day, isn’t it?’ she said, bustling around to the other side of the reception desk, tucking a fluffy yellow duster into her overall pocket as she did so.

‘It is indeed,’ agreed the Doctor.

‘How can I help you?’

‘We’d like two rooms, if possible. We’re meeting a friend of ours who we believe is staying here.’

‘Oh,’ the woman said, opening up the guest book. ‘And who would that be, then?’

‘Joyce Brunner. Doctor Joyce Brunner.’

She leafed through the book to find the newest page. ‘Mrs Brunner. Yes. Haven’t seen her since yesterday morning. Here to see her mother, isn’t she?’

‘At Graystairs, yes, I believe she is. How is her mother, by the way?’

‘I wouldn’t know, Mister...?’

'Doctor. Doctor John Smith.'

'Doctor Smith. I'm Mary – Mary Christmas.' She chuckled.

'Yes, I know. Blame my husband! I'd have been plain old Mary McIntire if he hadn't badgered me into marrying him. She keeps herself to herself does Mrs Brunner. A very private person, I get the impression.' She nodded knowledgeably, as if imparting some valuable piece of information to the two of them.

The Doctor just smiled as Mary started to fill in the guest book. She looked up at Ace, eyebrows raised.

'Ace,' she said simply.

'Ace?'

'Dorothy,' the Doctor stepped in with a glance at Ace.

'Dorothy McShane.' Ace pulled a face, but Mary was too busy scribbling to notice.

'And how long will you be staying?'

'Well that all depends. Just put us down for a couple of nights – we'll see how it goes. If that's alright with you.'

'Fine, Doctor, fine.' Mary gave a little laugh. 'You'll have the doctors up at Graystairs getting worried, you know – you and Mrs Brunner. All these medical people around. They'll be worrying about their jobs.'

'I don't think they need to worry about that,' Ace said. 'I expect they're *proper* doctors.'

The Doctor threw her a look.

Mary seemed slightly surprised that they had no luggage, but the Doctor told her that all their stuff was 'in their transport'

down in the village. Soon, the two of them were tucking into a full English breakfast (well, full *Scottish* breakfast – the Doctor insisted on haggis with his, only to change his mind when he discovered they didn't have vegetarian haggis); and between mouthfuls, the Doctor told Ace about his days at UNIT, his friendship with Joyce and his first meeting with Countess – then Miss – Gallowglass. Their paths had crossed when one of Miss Gallowglass's customers, annoyed that a parcel from some distant planet had got lost *en route*, had decided to

declare war on the Earth out of spite; and, as a totally unfathomable first step, had stolen one of the Crown Jewels. A clever bit of improvisation had led to the Doctor replacing it with a fake.

'I never found out whether they discovered it,' he said, wiping the egg from his plate with the last of his bread. 'But these days I tend to give the Tower of London a rather wide berth.'

Ace realised that she was laughing along with him as he downed his fourth cup of tea, and wondered if the whole tale had been a load of rubbish to take her mind off the fact that he still hadn't told her what had been happening on board the TARDIS. Comfortably stuffed, they thanked Mary profusely, and the Doctor decided that the village pub should be their next port of call in their search for Joyce.

Far from being the country tourist pub that Ace had expected, *The Two Foxes* was more like something from a Hammer film – a low ceiling, a miserable-looking fire trying to burn in an admittedly quaint fireplace, and a few shifty-looking locals in dark pullovers and hats who fell silent as they walked in.

'You don't want to be around these parts after dark, miss,'

Ace whispered over the Doctor's shoulder in her best rural accent.

Obviously she hadn't whispered it quietly enough. As the Doctor strode up to the bar, someone behind her, in exactly the same voice, muttered 'There's *things* in them woods that no man were meant to see.'

Ace whirled around to be faced with the broadest and daftestlooking grin she'd ever seen. A man – probably not much older than herself, maybe twenty-five tops – was smirking at her, leaning against the doorframe with a pint of lager in his hand.

His hair was cropped in an almost military style, and his eyes were wide-set and pale blue. Instinctively she smiled back, felt herself flush with embarrassment, and hurriedly joined the Doctor at the bar. She peered back to see the man, still smiling.

Looking around the bar, she saw that everyone else had resumed their conversations or dominoes or plans to burn down the Count's castle – or whatever it was they were doing. It seemed that the idiot at the door had been the only one to have heard her. With a puzzled look in the direction of Ace's stare, the Doctor whispered: 'Friend of yours?'

Ace gave him a dirty look, taking the proffered glass of Irn-Bru. ‘Inside or out?’ he asked.

‘Out,’ she replied, trying not to smile back at the man who was watching her.

‘The weather is lovely,’ he agreed, and followed her, glass of water in hand. They plonked themselves down on the bench that ran along the front of the pub, and the Doctor took a sip of his water. ‘Welsh,’ he said thoughtfully, after a few moments.

‘You’d have thought they’d only have gone for homegrown around here.’

The Doctor ummed.

‘How can you tell, anyway?’ Ace asked.

‘Accent.’

‘Eh?’

‘The barman’s accent. Welsh. Probably north – Anglesey, maybe.’

‘Oh. I thought you meant the water.’

The Doctor took another sip. ‘No, definitely Scottish.

Straight out of the tap under the bar. Looked at me as if I was mad when I asked for a mineral water. And unfortunately didn’t know anything about Joyce.’

‘It is 1982, Professor. Mineral water might be what you’d get in your fancy London wine bars, but we’re hardly at civilisation’s hub here, are we? Anyway, it’s probably laced with toxins from some local paper mill – that’s what’s making the locals act like morons. That or the inbreeding.’

‘Ace..,’ admonished the Doctor, taking off his hat and fanning himself gently with it, despite the sharp, cool morning air. He pulled out his shiny new fobwatch and glanced at it.

‘So... Alzheimer’s,’ she said. ‘Apart from it being what old folks get, what’s it all about then?’

‘It’s a form of degenerative disease,’ the Doctor said.

‘Amongst other things, knotty tangles of protein start clogging up the brain. Memory and personality start to dissolve.’ He paused, gazing into the distance. ‘Very sad, very tragic. Not only for the sufferers, but for their families and friends as well.’

‘Do Time Lords get it?’

‘Oh, we get far worse things than Alzheimer’s disease, Ace.

The dementias that plague us are much, much darker.’ He stopped, lost in his own thoughts. Ace said nothing for a few moments, watching his face for a sign that he’d come back to the present, back to the conversation.

‘And is there a cure for it?’

‘There’s a cure for everything, if you look hard enough – even incessant curiosity and questions.’

‘But you must know what happens. It’s 1982 now, right. And this Graystairs place seems to have a cure for it. We’ve just come from 2012, and you’ve been all over the future, so you must know whether this is a *real* cure, or just the usual load of charlatans taking advantage.’

‘Oh yes, there’s a cure. But I’m not convinced this is the time or place for it.’ He gave her a deliberately enigmatic smile.

‘Besides which, I shouldn’t be telling you about the future of your species, anyway.’

‘Professor! How come you can take me all over the place –

the future, the past, outer space and all that; let me see things that haven’t happened yet, and then tell me you can’t let me in on a secret that I could have found out just by picking up a medical book in a bookshop a few hours ago?’

‘Context, Ace, context. It’s one thing letting you experience the future, seeing how it all fits together, how events of the past have inexorably led to that future – and just dumping a load of anachronistic information in your lap. It’s all about consequences –’

‘Webs of time, yes, I know,’ she laughed knowingly.

‘Think of it this way: if you knew what was going to happen to you –

say you got a peek just 24 hours into your own future –

what would you do?’

‘When the future finally came around?’

The Doctor nodded, eyes narrowed, chin tilted back just a little, as if he were testing her. Ace shrugged. ‘Make sure it happens the way I saw it, I s’pose.’

‘But what if you could improve it, make it better in some way because of what you’d seen was coming?’

It was Ace’s turn to narrow her eyes. ‘This is a trick question, right? Well...’ She pondered it as the Doctor sipped his water.

Then she smiled: easy! ‘Seeing as it’s my future and not my past, I can change it, right...? It hasn’t happened yet, so nothing’s fixed in stone.’

His face gave nothing away for a few moments as he stared into the spring sunshine. Then he turned back to her and gave her a sad look of disappointment.

‘Wrong answer, eh?’ She sighed.

‘Every moment in time is the past from someone’s perspective, Ace. Just because it hasn’t already happened to you yet, doesn’t mean it hasn’t already happened to you *then*.’

‘This,’ she said wryly, ‘is the point where I start to glaze over, isn’t it? And you tell me not to go mucking about with time.’

‘Usually,’ he agreed sagely. ‘Just remember: I have a lot more experience of mucking about with time than you do.’

Ace eyed him dubiously. ‘What about Joyce’s message, anyway?’

The Doctor pulled out a rather dog-eared postcard –

yellowed and oddly brittle, like the newspapers that her mum had found lining the floor when she’d decided to splash out on a new lounge carpet – and handed it to her. Instinctively, she raised it to her nose and sniffed. It smelled *old*. But then, she remembered, it had been waiting for him with Countess Gallowglass for 30 years. The picture on the front was of rolling green and purple hills, an intense blue sky above them. She flipped it over. As informative messages went, it left a lot to be desired: in hurried and quaintly old-persony

handwriting it said that something odd was happening at a place called Graystairs where her mother was receiving treatment. It gave the address of the B&B – and that was about it.

Ace handed the card back. ‘Not giving too much away, is she?’

The Doctor hmmed to himself again, putting the card back in his pocket.

‘So maybe we should go straight up to this Graystairs place.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I’d like to know more about it first. How about if you’ he tapped her on the nose ‘ask around the village about it while I go back to the B&B and find out what time lunch is.’

‘Tell you what,’ Ace said. ‘How about if I ask around the village, and you go back to the B&B and find out what time lunch is.’ She grinned at him. ‘And have a snoop around while you’re there.’

He looked offended. ‘Snooping is for amateurs,’ he said. ‘I’d prefer to call it a reconnaissance mission. But yes, there may be a clue or two in Joyce’s room.’

Throwing her a smile, the Doctor jumped to his feet. ‘Come on. Things to do, scones to jam, teas to cream.’

‘If I didn’t know better,’ she said as they set off, ‘I’d think you had an obsession with food.’

Half an hour later, Ace was beginning to get bored. Despite the gentle spring warmth, the clear air and the soft tang of heather in her nostrils, she was starting to look back fondly to the heavy, noisy warmth of London in 2012. She wasn’t a country girl at heart, she knew. Still, she had a job to do.

Since the Doctor had headed back to the B&B, she’d been accosting anyone she could find, asking them if they’d seen Joyce or if they knew anything about Graystairs. For inhabitants of such a small village, either the locals were very good at minding their own business, or Joyce had kept herself to herself. The women were polite, even as they looked her up and down with that slightly disapproving air. At least the inhabitants of Muirbridge were polite enough not to comment on how it was no way for a young girl to dress.

The men, unsurprisingly, were more than happy to chat to Ace – even though they had little more to add than the women. Yes, they knew

that some professor woman had come up from London; yes, they knew that she'd come to visit her mother up at the loony-bin; but no, they hadn't seen her since she arrived a few days ago – although they invariably knew someone who had. Ace was beginning to think that she should go straight to Graystairs and cut out all this faffing around, but she remembered what the Doctor had said – although why she should play by his rules when he still refused to tell her what he'd been up to in the TARDIS, she didn't know. She had decided to give the pub one last go (and, she hoped, get herself a pint without the Doctor around to act as nanny) when she saw a familiar face coming out of the village shop, carrier bag in hand.

It was the bloke from the pub who'd embarrassed her earlier.

For a moment, she thought of ducking into the post office, but by the time she'd decided that that was just silly kids' stuff, it was too late anyway. He'd seen her, and was advancing towards her with a wry grin on his face.

'Hello again!' he said, coming to a halt.

She smiled back. 'Been shopping?'

'Oh, just a few basic rations. Milk, bread. Listen,' he said,
'sorry about the pub business earlier.'

'Don't worry about it. Just messing about, really.' She felt her cheeks redden and had a desperate urge to run away. God, thought Ace, this is going from bad to worse. She cast around desperately for an excuse to be off, but before she could, the man stuck out his hand.

'Michael,' he said. 'Michael Ashworth. Nice to meet you. I'm camping down on the edge of the village.' He gestured past the pub. She shook his hand. 'I'm Ace. No, honestly.' She saw the slight disbelief in his eyes. 'Well, not honestly. I mean, what kind of parents would name their daughter Ace. But my proper name's too naff.'

'Fair enough. Ace it is. Up here with your dad, are you – I assume it was your dad? Grandad?'

'Oh, the Doctor? Nah, just a mate. I look after him. Sort of bodyguard, really.'

Michael looked momentarily confused, as if mentally juggling to correct some preconception he held about the Doctor and Ace's

relationship. She jumped in, too quickly. ‘Oh it’s not like that – he’s old enough to be my grandad!’

Michael laughed and shook his head, his pale blue eyes smiling as he shared Ace’s embarrassment.

‘No, no, that’s not what I... I thought, I mean, I wondered if you’d come here for Graystairs. Sorry.’ He looked away, and Ace felt a flash of relief that she wasn’t the only one stumbling around, blind, in this conversation.

‘No, we’re looking for a friend of the Doctor’s.’

‘And have you found him?’

‘Her. No. The Doctor seems to think something’s happened to her.’

Michael’s eyes narrowed, thoughtfully, and Ace saw his jaw Bench. ‘So who is she, this mystery woman?’

‘Her name’s Joyce Brunner. She and the Doctor used to work together.’

He nodded slowly. Then, as if suddenly remembering the carrier bag in his hand, he took a step backwards. ‘Right, well good luck. Gotta get back. See you later, maybe.’

‘Oh, right.’ Suddenly, Ace felt a flash of disappointment. Just when she thought she’d made a new friend – and not a bad looking one at that – he was off. ‘Yeah. See you later.’

And with a short, sharp smile, Michael turned away and headed up the street.

As he disappeared around the corner, Ace hitched her rucksack onto her back and turned towards the pub. There was still that pint to attend to. Out of the corner of her eye, back along the street towards the war memorial that stood in the circular grassy clearing at the centre of the village, she caught a flicker of movement. But there was no one there. She felt the hairs on her neck rise. She’d never been quite sure whether she’d believed all that guff about being able to sense when someone was watching her – but if it was true, then this must be what it felt like. She stood and surveyed the village. A couple of teenage backpackers, kitted out in yellow and blue cagoules and woolly hats came round the corner, struggling with an unruly map that fluttered and flapped, desperate to get out of their grip. She

checked her watch and realised she'd spent the best part of two hours getting nowhere. Maybe she should go and find Joyce's mum, and see if she had seen Joyce. She had no problem finding someone who knew the way to Graystairs: the first person she asked – a rather unlikely-looking youth with acne and a bike that was far too big for him – pulled a loony-eyes face at her.

'What d'you wanna go up there for? You a nutter or what?'

Despite the fact that it was language that she herself might have used to describe Alzheimer's sufferers, Ace suddenly felt very defensive of Graystairs' patients. 'Oi!' she said, indignant.

'That could be your grandad or grandma up there one day.'

'Not likely,' the youth sneered in a heavy Scots brogue that rendered his words all but unintelligible. 'All of mine are dead –

apart from my mam's mam, and no one knows where she is!'

'Scared 'em all away did you?'

The youth gave a mock laugh. 'It's about a mile up that way

– up the hill. You cannae miss it. You have to go up a lane through a wood. And it's haunted. And there are wolves,' he added, baring his rickety teeth.

'Yeah, course there are,' Ace said, turning to go.

'Suit yourself,' the lad said, remounting his bike and pushing away on it. 'What d'you think's eating all the sheep?' And, flicking a V-sign at her, he pedalled off frantically.

And indeed the lad had been right – at least about how far Graystairs was. From the main road it was clearly signposted.

She wouldn't have fancied trying to find it in the dark, though: the road wove through a densely wooded area, daffodils and crocuses freckling the ground, leading slowly upwards until, through a break in the trees, she saw the house. With the sun behind it, throwing the front into shadow, it looked grey and gloomy, and Ace could well believe the youth's story about it being haunted.

Suddenly she heard the crack of a twig, sharp as gunfire, somewhere in the wood to her right. She turned, and caught sight of a brief, dark

blur of movement as someone – or something – small and slender darted behind a tree. She felt her pulse begin to race. Ace took a few steps towards the edge of the road, taking some small comfort in the weight of her backpack and its contents. She cast around on the ground for a stick big enough to use as a club, and, as she did, she saw another flicker from the woods.

‘Who’s there?’ she called, picking up the nearest branch and gripping it tightly, feeling its cold, slimy surface in her hand.

Away in the distance she heard the crashing noise of footsteps, but the trees were too dense for her to see anything. The sounds faded away. She really didn’t feel up to chasing them, whoever they were. Perhaps it was the lad with the bike, hoping to scare her, pretending to be the Ghost of Graystairs. Or maybe it was the figure that she’d not-quite-seen on the village green.

‘Dickhead!’ she muttered under her breath, and threw the stick down.

A few minutes later, as she climbed the mossy steps to the front door, she’d almost forgotten about her stalker. She cast her eyes over the windows, noting their neat uniformity, their matching curtains and window boxes. A small, grey lump at the edge of the lawn caught her eye, and glancing round she crossed quickly to it. Squatting down, she saw that it was the still and lifeless body of a squirrel. Something tightened up inside her chest as she gently touched the frail corpse. It was cold and surprisingly thin and bony. Part of its tiny head had been blown away by what she imagined had been a bullet, leaving a dark brown crust of dried blood. What kind of sickos did they have here, taking potshots at squirrels?

Taking a deep breath, she went back to the door and gave it a sharp rap. She heard muffled calls and someone shouting ‘OK!'

‘OK!’. Then the door opened, and a shiftless-looking man in his late twenties stood there; sullen face, shirt hanging out of his trousers. His slicked-back hair reminded Ace of something from the fifties – or of someone whose mother dressed him in the morning.

‘Yeah?’ he asked charmlessly.

‘Oh, good afternoon. I’m here to see Mrs Brunner.’

The man turned away from her, and, assuming she was supposed to follow him, she trooped inside and closed the door behind her.

'Wait here,' the man said, eyeing her up and down in a very discomforting way. 'I'll see if I can find Doctor Menzies, but I think he's out. You might have to come back later.'

Ace nodded and watched him shuffle away. She wondered if he was the squirrel murderer. It didn't seem unlikely. The moment he'd gone, she glanced around the hallway – doors led off into a lounge and another corridor, whilst a curving stairway led, presumably, to the patients' rooms. With a smile, she set off up the stairs.

The landing split into two, leading left and right; and at the end of the right-hand corridor, she could see another, smaller, flight of stairs which curved away, out of sight. Unfortunately, the bedroom doors only had the names of flowers on them, not those of the occupants. She paused, wondering whether she should try doors at random. But that might attract the kind of attention she didn't want – especially if the doctor was doing his rounds.

Just then, she heard the sound of low, female voices. Two elderly women were leaving one of the rooms on the stretch of corridor that led to the second staircase: one was slim and perky-looking with neatly-permed white hair, the other much stockier –

'a matronly bosom' was the phrase that sprang to mind – with a head of obviously-dyed brown hair that looked so lacquered that Ace felt sure it could have doubled as a crash helmet. They stopped their conversation as they saw her, and smiled sweetly.

'Good afternoon,' one of them said.

'Hi,' Ace replied. 'I wonder if you could help me?'

'We'll do our best, won't we, Connie,' the white-haired one said. Connie nodded.

'I'm looking for Mrs Brunner's room – d'you know which one it is? The bloke downstairs said that Doctor Menzies was probably out, so I should just find my own way there.'

'That'll be Bernard,' the brown-haired woman said, pulling a face. 'Useless he is, absolutely useless, isn't he, Jessie?' She folded her arms, hitching up her bosom as her mouth tightened. 'It's because of him that Eddie got out. We were lucky we weren't all murdered in our beds.' She raised a knowing eyebrow. 'That's probably what happened to Lucy and Hannah and Mrs McMurdo.'

'And Dave – lovely boy, Dave,' added Jessie wistfully

'What?' asked Ace, wondering whether this Eddie character could be connected with Joyce. 'Murdered by Eddie?'

'Oh, no,' said Jessie, dearly horrified at the thought. 'Eddie wouldn't hurt a fly. No, I mean leaving the door open.'

Connie nodded conspiratorially. 'It's dreadful, isn't it?'

'Is it?' Ace was starting to get confused about who'd vanished, who'd been murdered and who Eddie was. Where was Miss Marple when you needed her?

Connie nodded again, vigorously. 'It's a wicked world out there nowadays. You read about all those terrible things in the papers.'

'Don't get us started,' Jessie said, rolling her eyes and placing a hand on Connie's arm. 'Norma's in the Peonie Room, isn't she, Connie. Or have they moved her?'

'She was last time I heard – just along there on your left,'

Connie agreed.

'Thanks,' Ace said warily, half expecting the two of them to lunge at her with sharpened crochet hooks. 'You've been really kind.'

She watched Connie and Jessie set off downstairs. Get a move on, she told herself. If those two run into Bernard, he'll have security after me before I know it. With sudden annoyance, she realised that she hadn't asked about this Eddie. Maybe she'd catch the two old dears later – if they didn't disappear in the meantime.

Ace listened at the door for a moment before trying the handle. It would be ironic if Joyce's mum were the person that the doctor was seeing. She slipped inside.

The curtains were drawn, a shroud of thin daylight cast across the room. Under a flowered bedspread, an elderly woman slept. What now? thought Ace, glancing around the room. Her eyes briefly took in the hairbrush and perfume spray on the dressing table, a framed photo, a glass of water and an alarm dock beside the bed. A chair was pulled up alongside the bed.

Had Joyce been here recently? Ace suddenly realised that she should

have asked Connie and Jessie. Another reason to try to find them on her way out.

Ace froze as she heard soft footsteps outside the room. She glanced round – if she were caught, she'd be in deep trouble. As she stared at the door handle, it began to turn.

Chapter Three

The Doctor smiled broadly at Mary as he let himself in through the front door. She was polishing the reception desk, and the rich smell of beeswax filled the air.

'Back early, Doctor?' she said, glancing up.

'A couple of letters to write,' he said, folding his arms on the desk. 'I must say, you keep this place beautifully clean and tidy.'

'Why, thank you, Doctor,' beamed Mary, breaking off from her polishing for a moment. 'Did you find Mrs Brunner, then?'

'Ace, er Dorothy, is asking around in the village.'

'Well, she'll have no shortage of people willing to gossip,'

Mary said, a tight-lipped expression of disapproval crossing her face as she returned to her polishing. The sound of the radio, playing something by the Carpenters, drifted along the hall from the kitchen.

'We've only just begun,' the Doctor murmured to himself with a quiet smile.

'You like the Carpenters then, do you, Doctor?' Mary asked.

'They have their moments – although I've had to persuade at least three different alien races not to invade the Earth on the strength of *Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft*.' He tipped his hat to her and trotted up the stairs.

Claudette hurried along the corridor, almost tripping in her haste. She wished she hadn't agreed to come in on a Saturday, but she had and there was nothing she could do about it. The pile of fluffy towels in her arms tottered and threatened to fall, but she gathered them to her and held them tightly, a shield against this place and its constant weirdness. A lump came to her throat, a sick, empty feeling in the pit of her stomach, as she tried hard not to think about what she'd just

witnessed. In fact, she tried so hard not to think about it that she couldn't think about anything else.

The fact that there was a strange girl in Norma's room, half crouched as if she were planning to attack, shattered what little composure she'd managed to cling on to; and before she knew it, the cloud of white towels was a jumbled, snowy mess on the floor.

'Sorry,' the girl apologised, breaking out of the 'rabbit caught in headlights' trance that she seemed to have been in.

Claudette muttered a flustered something or other and began gathering the towels up, feeling like she might burst into tears at any moment; the girl moved to help her, and Claudette inexplicably found herself backing away.

'Are you OK?' the girl asked. Claudette nodded and tried an unconvincing smile. 'I'll give you a hand,' the girl said, and began folding the towels and stacking them on the dressing table.

'What's your name? I'm Ace.'

'Claudette,' she answered and they shook hands in a clumsy, this-is-what-adults-do sort of way.

She looked down at Norma, still soundly asleep. 'You come to see your grandmother, then?' she asked, trying to defuse the awkwardness. Ace nodded, her eyes darting away at the last minute.

'Yeah, yeah,' she said. 'She's asleep – I didn't want to wake her.'

Claudette nodded. 'I think she's been for a treatment session – they dope them up with sedatives, so she'll probably be out for a while.'

She was an odd one, thought Claudette, as the two of them set about building up the stack of towels on the dressing table.

Probably about her own age, hair braided back into a ponytail, a jacket that looked a couple of sizes too big for her, and loads of badges – which, Claudette thought, she probably wore to make herself look more 'street' than she actually was. She had a nice smile, though – decent.

'Where are you from, then?' Claudette asked.

The girl waved her hand airily ‘Around. Perivale, really.

London.’

‘Wow, a long way to come. What’s it like?’

‘London? Oh, you know... Busy, noisy. Some great shops, though. You never been?’

Claudette shook her head and pulled a face. ‘Wanted to go last summer – we’ve got some relatives down in Essex – but Mum changed her mind at the last minute and it all got cancelled.’ She glanced at her watch and gave a sigh. ‘I’d better get on,’ she said heavily, laying a couple of towels on the chair beside the bed. ‘We’re a bit short-handed at the moment.’

‘So I gather,’ Ace said. ‘Two of the old dears told me that it’s turning into the *Marie Celeste* around here – people disappearing left, right and centre.’

‘And without even giving us a chance for a goodbye whip-round. Not sure how long I’ll be staying myself.’ Claudette pulled a grim face.

‘Where do they go for this treatment, anyway?’ asked Ace suddenly, remembering that she really ought to have something a bit more meaty to report back to the Doctor.

Claudette swallowed, suddenly remembering what had happened to her ten minutes before.

‘Hey, what’s up?’

Claudette’s face must have shown more than she’d thought.

Ace was by her side in an instant, a hand on her shoulder, strangely welcome despite Claudette’s only having known her for a few minutes. She shook her head. ‘It’s probably nothing.’

Ace smiled. ‘If I had a quid for the number of times I’ve heard people say that when it turned out to be anything but, I’d be rolling in it. Come on, what’s wrong?’

Claudette took a deep breath and sat unsteadily at the foot of the bed – almost forgetting that an elderly woman still slept in it

– her hands knotting and unknotting in her lap. She knew that if she didn’t tell someone, she’d go mad.

Claudette didn't normally have any business being up there, on the second floor. But when she'd been told to change all the towels in the residents' rooms, she'd found the linen cupboard almost empty. She couldn't find Steve anywhere to ask him where they'd been put, so the obvious thing to do was to ask Megan.

So quietly, apprehensively, she'd gone up the twisty little flight of stairs to the top of the house, looking for her. Unlike the ground and first floors, which were warm and cosy, painted cheerful, bright colours, the attic floor gave the impression that they'd run out of money and had left it just as it had been for years: the doors and skirting boards were painted an unappealing brown; the walls had probably once been cream, but were now so scuffed and stained that it was hard to be certain. The bare bulbs that hung from the ceiling glared at her accusingly, making her feel naked and exposed.

That was when she'd heard it: music, coming from nearby.

Normally she wouldn't have thought anything of it: there was usually a radio or three playing in the house somewhere –

whether Radio 1 in the kitchen during mealtimes, Radio 2 in the residents' lounge when there was nothing worth watching on the telly, or, occasionally, Radio 3 when Doctor Menzies thought that no one would notice. Which, of course, they usually did pretty quickly. But up here, away from the cosy domesticity of the rest of Graystairs, it seemed creepy, haunting.

This was definitely Radio 3 music, Claudette thought – posh opera as she called it. A woman wailed in some foreign language like her world was falling apart. She suddenly felt like an intruder up here, interfering in someone else's grief. Maybe Doctor Menzies was running a session in the therapy room at the other end of the corridor. Thinking no more about it, other than how very, very sad the music sounded, Claudette tapped lightly on Megan's door: *Megan's Room – Private* was written, in threatening, blocky letters with a marker pen on one of the peeling panels.

There was no answer, so she knocked again. Maybe she was asleep. Claudette knew she had a real temper on her, and probably wouldn't take too kindly to being woken for something like clean towels, so she turned away from the door, intending to have another, more determined hunt around the house for them on her own. As she did

so, Claudette heard the long, shuddering, indrawn breath of someone sobbing.

She was torn: although it wasn't forbidden to come up here, it had been strongly suggested that it was not somewhere the staff should be. The treatment room was the reason given, although there was a quiet understanding that Mr Sooal, Graystairs' reclusive owner, had his room here and valued his privacy. But the sobbing was so pitiful, so *lost*, that Claudette couldn't just ignore it. As quietly as she could – and simultaneously aware that if she was caught *creeping* around, she'd be in even more trouble – she took a few steps along the threadbare Axminster. The music and the crying grew louder until she found herself at a door – a dirty brown door, much like any of the others on the landing.

She flinched sharply as a crash and the sound of breaking china shattered the fragile calm.

'Hello?' she called tentatively, hoping, desperately hoping, that no one answered. Quite why she repeated her call, a little louder, she wasn't sure. At that moment, she wanted to be anywhere but there. Her hand was on the door handle, turning it, her body and her heart racing ahead of her mind and any consideration of the consequences. And as she pushed it open, the music swelled in volume and abruptly ceased.

Hunched over on himself in a tatty, leatherette armchair basking in the sharp, angular morning light that streamed in through the skylight, was a man, his hands wrapped around the back of his neck. More than a man trying to block the world out, Claudette got the cold impression of a man trying to hold himself in. His skin was pale and paper thin, his head skeletal and bald.

'Hello?' she found herself saying again – this time in a voice just seconds away from cracking completely.

He turned sharply, explosively, his eyes as pink as a white rat's, his lips thin and bloodless.

'What are you doing here?' he spat. 'Get out!'

As Claudette fled, the man turned away, and her last impression of him was of the tears streaming down his cheeks.

'Weird,' breathed Ace as Claudette came to the end of her tale and looked up at her. Her brown eyes were full of expectation.

'So that was this mysterious Mr Sooal?'

Claudette nodded. 'I think so – I've never seen him before, but I've heard the others talk about him.'

'He never comes out of his room?'

'Not often. One or two people have seen him moving about the house in the middle of the night, but Megan's warned us that we aren't to bother him. She says he's a very private person.'

'And it's an odd name, isn't it?' mused Ace. 'Sooal. Is he foreign?'

Claudette shrugged. 'It does sound a bit, I dunno, Indian or something, doesn't it?' Claudette caught sight of the bedside clock. 'I've got to go,' she said hastily, picking up the pile of towels.

'Just one more thing,' Ace said. 'Doctor Brunner – er, my mum. Have you seen her anywhere?'

'I saw her the other weekend when she brought your gran up – but I've not been here since Thursday.' She frowned. 'Why? Didn't she come in with you?' Claudette saw Ace's expression.
'What is it? What's happened?'

'That's just it,' said Ace heavily. 'I don't know. She's disappeared completely.'

The Doctor let himself into his room and stood for a moment, deep in thought.

Joyce's room was number five. Reading the guest book upsidedown had been a piece of cake – although he felt sure that Mary had seen that he was staring at it. He laid his hat and umbrella on the bed, and slipped quietly out of the room, pulling the door dosed behind him. Room five was just along the corridor.

He peered over the banister and saw Mary's elbow, pistolling backwards and forwards as she polished the life out of the desk.

He smiled – he could do with someone like Mary in the TARDIS.

Joyce's door was, unsurprisingly, locked. A few seconds later he had it open, and he slipped inside.

At first, the Doctor wondered whether he'd got the right room. It looked unused. But then he remembered how tidy and formal Joyce could be. He noticed the neat collection of bottles on the glass shelf above the sink. He crossed to the dressing table, and suppressing a momentary twinge of guilt, he began opening drawers, looking for anything that might give him more clues. He really hoped that Ace's investigations would turn up something, since he doubted he would find anything here. She'd been missing since yesterday morning, and, knowing Joyce, it seemed unlikely that she would have stayed out all night without letting someone know where she was.

A vague sense of impropriety nudged at him as he poked tentatively through the contents of the drawers. Clothes, some still with their price tags attached, a brown bottle of tablets, a couple of letters. The only thing about them that spoke to him was the precision with which they'd been laid out. Disappointed

– and vaguely unnerved by how much of his friend's character was revealed in those few items and their layout – he slid the last drawer shut, noticing a photograph in a simple, silver frame on the bedside table. It showed Joyce and two men, presumably her husband and son, in UNIT dress uniform. On a whim, he produced a scrap of paper and a pencil from his pocket, scribbled a note, and propped it up against the frame.

The teashop, the Doctor was delighted to discover a half hour later, doubled as the post office. Which meant that not only could he get himself a decent cup of tea, but he could also find out if Joyce had bought the stamp there for her postcard to him.

It was also – as he'd hoped – the centre of the village's gossip network. As he sipped his tea, he skipped through a paperback copy of some science fiction nonsense called *The Cassandra Experience* that he'd found in his pocket. He didn't believe a word of it – but then, that was the Cassandra Experience all over. As he scanned the book, looking for historical inaccuracies and scribbling notes in the margin, he listened to the conversations going on around him.

A young man and a woman discussed what they were going to do with their premium bond win (which caused something of a hush amongst the other customers until it was revealed that they'd won the princely sum of twenty-five pounds); a brawny, weatherbeaten young man from some nearby farm made desperate attempts to get the waitress to go out with him on Friday night; and a rather distant-looking elderly man picked at his sandwich as if he suspected it had been poisoned,

glancing nervously around as he prodded at it.

Of the three, the Doctor found the last the most interesting: he seemed detached from everything around him, troubled in some way that the Doctor found instinctively intriguing. When the waitress came over to ask him if his sandwich was OK, the Man jumped and nodded eagerly, embarrassed. Over the top of his book, the Doctor watched him stir his tea listlessly, trying hard not to clink the spoon against the side of the cup.

The man looked to be in his seventies, casually dressed in a thick grey cardigan. He had slicked-back white hair and black-framed glasses hiding deep-set, worried eyes. He looked a little lost and confused – and somewhat out of place in Muirbridge's one and only teashop. The Doctor watched as the man stared at his hands – first the palms, then the backs; he flexed his fingers, observing the joints; then he examined his fingernails, frowning curiously.

The Doctor slid the book into his pocket, picked up his tea and the remains of his scone, and crossed to the man's table. He smiled his most disarming smile. 'I'm the Doctor, and I couldn't help but notice that you seem rather preoccupied with your hands,' he remarked, slipping into the empty seat opposite him.

The man glanced down at his long, thin fingers and then back at the Doctor. 'There's a phrase, isn't there?' he said distantly. "Knowing something like the back of your hand"

Surely it's impossible to ever forget what the backs of your hands look like?"

'There's no such word as impossible. Apart from in the dictionary, of course. And one of the marvellous things about humans is that they're capable of any number of impossible things – either before or after breakfast.'

The man's eyes narrowed – more out of curiosity, thought the Doctor, than suspicion. 'You talk as if you're not human.'

'Well,' the Doctor replied airily, evasively, 'it's such an imprecise term, isn't it? Physiology, physiognomy...' He leaned forwards and studied the man's face. 'Nature. Some of the most human people I've come across haven't been within a billion miles of a piece of DNA. And some of the most inhuman wouldn't have stood out in an identity parade with Nelson Mandela and Gandhi. So which category do you think you fall into?'

The man pulled back sharply in his seat at the suddenness of the Doctor's question. 'I have to go,' he said, pushing himself away from the table and standing up.

The Doctor raised a hand, realising that he'd been a tad too forthright: the man was scared, and he should have seen it earlier. 'Maybe I can help you.'

'I have to go,' repeated the man, reaching for the door handle. The Doctor noticed the waitress staring at the man.

Running out without paying your bill around here was, no doubt, a social gaffe of the highest order. As the Doctor turned to reassure her he felt a cold gust of wind from the open door, and heard the tinkling of the bell. By the time he'd got to his feet, rooted around in his pocket for a handful of coins and slapped them on the table, the man had gone. The Doctor stood outside in the bright spring sunlight, annoyed at himself. He tapped his upper teeth with the tips of his fingers, and tried to remember what little he knew about iridology.

The gentle warmth of the sun had been replaced with a cool, spring chill. Harry and George watched Megan rounding up the other residents of Graystairs who were foolish – or rebellious –

enough to still be out in the garden. There was something about Megan, Harry thought wryly, that encouraged rebellion: he could imagine that some of the more feisty residents at Graystairs might have formed a resistance movement, and were, even now, digging a tunnel beneath their feet in a bid for freedom.

'How long have we been here, then?' asked Harry, out of nowhere.

'About half an hour, I think.'

'No, *here*. At Graystairs.'

'Seems like forever.'

'As long as that?'

'At least.' George frowned. 'The days run into each other here, don't they? I can hardly remember what we had for lunch yesterday.' He chuckled. 'A blessed relief, if today's was anything to go by.'

Harry laughed with him, watching Enid remonstrating with Megan. Megan had grabbed the handles on the back of Enid's wheelchair, and

was trying to steer her back towards the house; but Enid – good old Enid – was having none of it, and was stubbornly gripping the wheels of the chair, determined to enjoy the sunset for just a little longer.

Suddenly, Harry gave a gasp and his hands flew to his forehead. He moaned in pain, doubling up.

‘Harry – what is it? What’s up?’ George forgot all about *Uberfuehrer* Megan as Harry continued to groan. He shook his head, trying to clear the grey threads which were shooting across his field of vision, obscuring the vivid orange sky.

‘I... I... I’m not sure...’

George tottered unsteadily to his feet, glancing between Megan and Harry, wondering whether to call her. He looked down at Harry, whose hands had dropped to his lap and who was now staring away into the distance, his face illuminated by the fiery colours of the setting sun. A strange puzzlement was growing in his eyes, and George felt a chill ripple down his spine.

‘Harry? Are you OK?’

Harry looked up at him, as if seeing him clearly for the first time. ‘I remember,’ he whispered, reaching up and clutching George’s arm. ‘It’s suddenly there, all of it.’

‘Remember what? For God’s sake, Harry, what’s wrong?’

A stormcloud spread across Harry’s face, and George felt his guts turn to ice.

‘I remember the war, George. I remember all of it – the tanks, rolling across the countryside, screaming children raising their hands, their mothers wailing and clasping them to themselves, the stink of blood and burning.’ Trembling, he looked up at George, his eyes fever bright. ‘I remember it George – every last, glorious moment!’

Chapter Four

Claire glanced at the old station dock above the optics: it seemed like only a couple of hours since she’d started her shift behind the bar, and the dock confirmed it. The urn Foxes wasn’t so bad in the evening drink loosened tongues, and the conversation and atmosphere were much more amicable. The afternoons, though... Sad no-hoppers whiling away their days, waiting for their wives to come home from work,

waiting for their giros, waiting for... most of them had forgotten what it was they were waiting for.

But at least they were quiet. She glanced round, wondering if she could steal a few minutes to read another chapter of her sociology book, tucked away under the bar. But a couple of the farm lads swaggered in noisily, laughing at some private dirty joke, and Claire had to abandon sociology theory for practical.

As she pulled their pints, she winced uncomfortably at their frightening racism and unashamed glee at the ‘Argie-bashing’

down in the Falklands.

‘Scumbags,’ came a mutter from further down the bar, just a little louder than Claire would have considered wise, as the lads strutted over to a corner table with their pints slopping in their hands. A young girl with long, brown hair tied back, was perched on a stool at the other end of the bar. She had a round, pleasant face, but her eyes looked harder than they had any right to be in someone her age. Claire remembered serving her earlier, but she’d look worried, absorbed, and Claire hadn’t been in the mood to play agony aunt. She nodded back at the girl.

‘Racist scumbags at that,’ Claire sighed in agreement. ‘You get used to it. I try to think about it as coursework.’

The girl raised her eyebrows. ‘What are you studying?

Insects?’

Claire laughed and pulled out her book, slamming it down on the bar. The girl twisted her head to read the title of the book.

‘It’s an OU course,’ Claire explained. ‘Anything to get me away from here.’

‘That bad, eh?’ The girl downed the dregs of her lager.

'That bad. You here for Graystairs?'

'Does it show?' The girl nodded as Claire pointed at her empty glass. She pulled her another.

'Not really – just that strangers are few and far between round here. The odd camper or backpacker. We get a few fishing trips and landscape painters who don't know blue from green.'

Who is it, then? Your grandad? Grandma?'

The girl paused. 'Grandad.' She took an appreciative sip of her lager, clearly weighing up how much to impart to this nosey, over-brained barmaid. No problem, thought Claire. People were generally a bit awkward about Graystairs. 'So – what do people say about the place?' the girl asked.

Claire pulled a face as a middle-aged couple came in, all tweeds and stout shoes, accompanied by their little black dog.

They looked around the pub slowly, as if surveying it, before stepping up to the bar.

'Two juices of orange,' the woman said precisely.

'Two orange juices?' queried Claire with a frown.

'That's correct,' the woman said with a nod.

Claire served them and returned to Ace as the couple ensconced themselves silently in a corner near the fire, the dog taking up position between them.

'Foreign tourists?' asked Ace.

Claire shook her head. 'No, locals I think. They sound German or something, don't they? Don't often see them in here but they've been in a few times over the last couple of days.'

Probably bored witless with scenery and fresh air. Anyway, I was telling you about Graystairs, wasn't I?'

As Ace drank her lager and Claire her own orange, she gave Ace a potted history of the place: Graystairs had been a convalescent home from when she was a little girl (her mother had worked there as a cleaner for a while until the 'odd behaviour' of the residents had

proved too much for her); and about three years ago, the home had been taken over by a Doctor Sooal (who liked to keep himself to himself and was never seen in the village) who, rumour had it, was working on some new treatment for Alzheimer's disease.

'And by all accounts, it's pretty effective,' she concluded.

'We've had people in here in tears, buying everyone drinks 'cos their mother or father's made a miraculous recovery.' The girl asked what the treatment actually involved, and Claire could only shrug. 'All very hush hush, really,' she confided – and then proceeded to prove that it was nothing of the sort by telling her that she'd heard it involved all sorts of electrical shocks and a host of strange chemical potions.

'I don't believe it myself, but Barry – the landlord here – says he's heard they make their patients drink their own, you know...

wee.'

The girl pulled a *yeuch* face and the two of them broke into disgusted giggles. Claire stopped herself, clasping her hand to her mouth.

'Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Not if your grandad is thinking of going there. Just pretend I didn't say anything, will you?'

Ace nodded good-naturedly. 'I'm Ace, by the way.'

'And what, exactly, are we pretending you didn't say?' said a voice suddenly, and Claire almost choked. A small man – dark brown jacket, cream hat, ugly umbrella with a chunky red handle

– stood at the bar, raising a disapproving eyebrow at the half-finished pint of lager that stood in front of Ace.

'Oh, Professor! Um, just looking after this for someone.' Ace gave a thin smile and gently pushed the glass away, distancing herself from it. Claire smirked. 'This must be your grandad, then.'

'Doctor, this is...?' Claire stepped in with her name and Ace's grandad tipped his hat at her. It seemed a bit odd that she'd called her grandfather 'Doctor' – maybe he had delusions about being a brain surgeon.

'Just remind me,' he said, a smile on his lips. 'What's the legal drinking age nowadays?' He darted a meaningful glance towards Ace's glass.

‘So, Grandad, had a nice stroll?’ Ace jumped in quickly – not as old as she acted, then, Claire noted.

‘Very nice, thank you. Glass of water for me, please.’

Claire set the Doctor’s drink on the bar and tucked her short, dark hair back over her ear.

‘So, you’re a doctor, are you? Ace has been telling me you’re thinking of going to Graystairs. ‘Work or, urn, pleasure?’

The Doctor threw Ace a look – half suspicion, half panic: obviously in denial, Claire thought, wishing she’d got further than chapter three. These two would make a great case-study.

The Doctor nodded knowingly. ‘I wouldn’t take any notice of Ace,’ he said *sotto voce*. ‘Especially after a pint of lager.’ He leaned closer to Claire and whispered theatrically, ‘She gets confused, you know.’

Claire glanced sidelong at Ace with a slightly awkward laugh, as though they shared a secret, and nodded at the Doctor as if to say ‘Of course she does.’

Ace jumped in again, almost knocking the remains of her pint over in the process. ‘I was telling Claire about Graystairs,’

she said. The Doctor frowned at her. ‘About how we’re going up there to have a look round. *Grandad*.’

‘Ahh, yes. Graystairs.’ The Doctor paused suddenly, his bemused expression giving the impression that he was catching up, mentally juggling the strands of conversation. A classic case, Claire thought. ‘Ace here is very kindly taking me to have my head sorted,’ he said. ‘Apparently, she thinks something’s come loose inside.’

‘Don’t worry, Grandad,’ Ace said with a cheery smile, patting his arm. ‘We’ll get you sorted. We don’t want you going for any more walks and having to be brought back from Dixons by the police with your pockets full of shoplifted radios.’

‘No,’ the Doctor replied, narrowing his eyes.

‘And I’m not sure Mrs, er, Gale will be so understanding next time she finds you wandering in her back garden at two in the morning in your underpants.’

‘I’m sure she won’t.’ The Doctor’s eyes were tight little slits now – almost as tight as his mouth.

‘Well, you seem fine to me,’ Claire said heartily – although she wasn’t at all sure that she’d sounded convincing.

‘Anyway, Grandad. Claire says that Graystairs has got quite a reputation, apparently.’

And Ace proceeded to tell the Doctor everything that Claire had told her – including the alleged drinking habits of the residents. The Doctor raised a dubious eyebrow. Claire felt she had to step in, just to make it clear that this was nothing more than third- or fourth-hand gossip.

‘Don’t worry,’ Ace said breezily. ‘It’s his favourite!’

Claire went off to serve someone at the other end of the bar and the Doctor leaned in to Ace: ‘And don’t you even think of calling me “Grandad” once we get back to the TARDIS –

“Professor” is bad enough. Anyway, have you found out anything about Joyce or Graystairs – other than whatever twaddle your friend’s been feeding you?’

‘Not really – I spoke to one of the staff, a girl called Claudette. She thinks the place is a bit weird, too: told me that some bloke called Sooal – who apparently owns the place – was crying in his room, listening to classical music.’

‘It has that effect sometimes. I remember when Puccini had that terrible cold –’

‘Yeah, yeah. Well anyway, Claudette hasn’t been on duty since Thursday, so she hasn’t seen Joyce, but this Sooal bloke sounds seriously creepy.’

The Doctor looked disapproving – or maybe just miffed because he hadn’t had the chance to finish another of his dubious name-dropping anecdotes. ‘Just because he cries to classical music? Ace, really.’

‘No, because Claudette made him sound seriously creepy: thin, bald, like some kind of albino goblin. She said she heard him smashing things up in his room before he started crying.

D’you reckon he could be an alien?’

'Ace,' he admonished gently. 'Mankind is quite capable of being "creepy" – as you so sensitively put it – without needing extraterrestrials to do it for them. And anyway,' he added, 'if he is, that makes two of them.'

'You've seen an alien?'

'I could be wrong,' he said, 'but if I remember my irises correctly, yes.'

'Flowers? What have flowers got to do with it?'

He sighed, leaned forward, and brought his finger sharply up to his own eye, halting it just a couple of millimetres from its surface. Or at least that's what she assumed: knowing the Doctor, he'd probably jabbed himself in the eye just for dramatic effect. 'I met someone today who had distinctly non-human irises. It sounds like Joyce had good reason to think there was something peculiar going on. Did anyone see you?'

'Only a couple of sweet old dears – Connie and Jessie. Oh, and the dork that answered the door. Bernard, I think he was called. But he was a tent short of a campsite.'

'Good! Then I think it's time we paid Graystairs a visit. You know,' he said wistfully as he nodded a goodbye to Claire, 'I'd almost forgotten what it was like to have a granddaughter.'

'There's a choice,' said Megan, avoiding eye contact with either the Doctor or Ace, gazing blankly at something that seemed to be hovering above their heads. She was chewing gum and rocking her hips to music in her head (probably something naff like *Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep*, thought Ace and tried not to smile). Megan seemed a most unlikely care assistant.

When she'd opened the front doors of Graystairs to them, Ace had half wondered whether Megan was staff or resident.

She'd been only two rungs up the evolutionary ladder from Bernard – who, thankfully, they saw no sign of. She had ushered them into an empty sitting room, pointed at a copy of *The People's Friend* -with, mysteriously, the head of the cover model carefully torn out – and told them cryptically: 'Sydney's been at it again, so if he offers to show you his scrapbook, just say no.'

Moments later, she'd returned to say that Doctor Menzies was doing his rounds, and that they could stay for tea until he could show them

round. An offer that the Doctor – at least –

hadn’t been able to refuse.

‘Splendid!’ he enthused, his eyes sparkling like those of a child who’s been offered a trip to McDonald’s.

‘Fritters or Dumfries pie?’ asked Megan.

‘Um.’ The Doctor frowned and wiggled his mouth around.

‘What would you recommend?’

‘Fish and chips from the village chippy.’

‘Oh. In that case I’ll have the fritters. Ace?’

‘Whatever,’ replied Ace glumly, just hoping that Megan turned out to be a secret alien spy, and that she’d get the chance to whack her one at some point in the proceedings. ‘Fritters too, I suppose.’

‘Excellent choice, madam,’ Megan said and shuffled away into the kitchen.

‘I thought you were a veggie,’ Ace hissed.

‘When in Rome, Ace. When in Rome. Anyway, they might be vegetarian fritters.’ He didn’t look too hopeful.

Ace glanced around the dining room. ‘How can they stand it?’ she whispered. Five large tables, thirty or so chairs, and acres and acres of painfully clashing chintz and doilies; every available surface was covered with little mats, coasters and ornaments –

china ladies with parasols, bizarre creatures made out of shells with goggly eyes, even a carved wooden African mask; a jumble sale of memories and experiences, crammed willy-nilly into a lace-trimmed hell. At the other end of the dining room, half a dozen of the residents were quietly finishing their meal. Ace wondered if Megan had positioned her and the Doctor as far away from them as possible on purpose. She smiled over at them, but the frail, birdlike woman who caught her glance returned it with a hard glare that made Ace turn away uncomfortably.

Suddenly, Megan slammed the kitchen door wide open, rattling the flowery plates on the dresser, and thrust her head into the room. ‘Fritters is off,’ she said.

'Dumfries pie it is, then,' said the Doctor, rubbing his hands.

'I can't wait.'

Minutes later, the two of them were staring disconsolately at an arrangement of food so dismal Ace felt as though they should be giving it a burial at sea rather than eating it. A crusty scab of pastry, covering what appeared to be chunks of bacon fat and tomatoes, nestled alongside a considerably undergenerous portion of pale chips and a scattering of wrinkly peas.

'Cruet's on the sideboard,' Megan informed them without so much as a backward glance as she shuffled back into the lounge to start the bingo, tugging down her skirt at the back for reasons known only to herself.

'I'm sure it is,' the Doctor said quietly. He pulled a mournful face at Ace and sighed.

She flicked a pea skilfully across the room where it fell into the cold fireplace, raising a halfhearted plume of ash. 'This is daft. Instead of sitting here being waited on by that great gawk, we could be searching for Joyce.'

'Well,' said the Doctor, and steepled his fingers together, elbowing the paper serviette in its pink plastic serviette ring out of the way. 'Let's think about this logically...'

Through the open door to the lounge, they could hear the dreary monotone of Megan calling the balls as the bingo got under way.

'Two fat ladies... number six.'

'Joyce's note told me that something strange is happening here, and asked me to come and look into it.'

'Which we're doing,' Ace said.

'Key of the door... number ten.'

'Which we're doing. Something she found made her suspicious enough to write to me, rather than call the police.'

And it was obviously something personal enough for her not to contact UNIT.'

'On its own... twenty-six.'

'And Mrs Christmas hasn't seen her since yesterday. So why don't we have a look around this establishment now, whilst it's quiet,' the Doctor said, pushing his plate away from him with a sigh. 'Judging by the deathly silence in there, there's a good chance that most of the residents will be in their rooms.'

'Probably boarded themselves in to stop her getting at them.'

And from what Claudette said, half the staff have left recently, so it should be even quieter.'

'Two little ducks... number thirteen.'

'You know,' said the Doctor archly, glancing towards the lounge, 'something doesn't add up around here.'

Ace gave a grin as they stood up quietly and headed for the door to the hallway. Ducking back to the lounge, she opened her mouth to call 'bingo' as loudly as she could – only to find it smothered by the Doctor's hand as he dragged her away.

'Spoilsport,' she muttered.

Throughout tea, Harry had been silent and withdrawn, eating his fritters with his head down. George sat opposite him, picking at his food. Every time George thought of a harmless, friendly comment to make, he only had to catch sight of Harry's face, dark and intense – creepy, frankly – and he changed his mind.

Since Harry's odd outburst in the gardens, they had hardly spoken. Connie and Jessie, the two dippy sisters, had come along to call them in for the meal, chattering away about how they were off for their next treatment session straight afterwards, and how they were so excited that they'd lost their appetites. Jessie, George thought, was showing definite signs of improvement – at least compared to Connie: she seemed less easily distracted, more focussed than she had before. Maybe she was going to be the next to recover. Megan had seen them and, with wild, cartwheeling motions of her arms, had waved the four of them back into the house. They'd trooped in for tea – and George had noticed a couple of newcomers at the other end of the dining room – a middle-aged man and a young girl, maybe his daughter.

Something in Harry's changed manner scared George; and yet, he felt a creeping envy. Was this how he would be when *his* treatment finally kicked in? It wasn't how Jessie seemed to be responding to hers. Was there any guarantee that it would work for him at all? Sometimes he

felt so angry with himself, with his screwed-up, broken brain. He knew that he was in Graystairs because he wasn't altogether there. Most of the others denied there was anything wrong with them, claiming Graystairs was some sort of holiday home and they were there just to give their sons or daughters or spouses a bit of a rest. But George knew the truth. He seemed to remember coming to Graystairs on a coach, along with a dozen other muttering, incoherent people, all of them gazing around, bemused and baffled. That had been..

he wasn't sure, but it must have been a couple of years ago at least. Before that there was nothing. He remembered, shortly after they'd arrived, talking to Megan, and her filling him in on all sorts of details from his past – the colour of his wife's hair, the number of children they'd had. Occasionally he had flashes, but they were so short, so dreamlike that they made no sense. He had no framework into which he could integrate them. They were like shards of other people's memories, dislocated and, occasionally, violent. Maybe if that was his past, he didn't *want* to remember.

He gave a start as Harry threw down his fork noisily. Some of the other residents at the table threw him disapproving looks especially Beattie – but it was clear Harry didn't care. He pushed his chair back and stood up.

'Hang on,' George said, positioning his knife and fork together. 'I'll come with you.'

It was strange how different smells brought to mind different ages, different memories, thought Ace. The TARDIS always had a cool, neutral smell – hints of ozone and camphor – which she now realized added to its comforting, safe atmosphere. She couldn't remember the smells of her old home in Perivale, but she knew that if she ever smelted them again, they'd bring up a whole jumble of memories, none of which would be totally comfortable.

Here in Graystairs, the main notes were of pot pourri and pine disinfectant, with tiny hints of... she didn't like to think of what the tiny hints were. She caught sight of a commode through an open doorway and, instinctively, her hand went to her nose. The Doctor didn't seem to notice – or, more likely, didn't care. The two of them did an almost complete circuit of the building, skirting round the main dining room, the residents'

lounge and the visitors' lounge, before finding themselves back in the hallway. Some of the residents were just finishing their meal, and they

almost literally ran into two elderly men with thick, silver-white hair as they came out. The Doctor doffed his hat to them and one of them nodded. His friend seemed distracted, hardly noticing them, pushing rudely between them as he headed up the stairs. The one who'd nodded gave an apologetic smile as he followed his companion.

'Watch out – here she comes!' hissed Ace, grabbing the Doctor by the jacket and pulling him into the shadows under the stairs as Megan came charging out, arms flailing, and bellowed up the stairs that they were missing the bingo and that she wasn't running it for the good of her health. She waited for a moment, hands on hips, and then strode back into the lounge, grumbling under her breath.

'Aha!' Ace heard the Doctor say, and turned to find him opening a small door under the stairs.

'Shouldn't we be upstairs looking for Joyce?'

'Cellars are much more interesting places, Ace: they're where everyone keeps their secrets, as I'm sure I've told you before.'

He gave her a crafty look and wiggled his eyebrows. 'And it might just be where they're hiding all the missing staff. Come on!' Ace opened her mouth to say that it was just as likely that Joyce was locked in a spare bedroom, but the Doctor had ducked through the doorway and was already out of sight.

Glancing back to make sure they hadn't been seen, Ace followed him, pulling the door closed behind her.

A single bare bulb illuminated the curving stone steps, worn concave at their edges by years of use. The flaking, whitewashed walls gave off a damp, clammy tang that seemed almost refreshing to Ace after the smells of the house. She caught up with the Doctor at the bottom of the steps. The room before them was long and wide, with a low ceiling striped with bright, fluorescent lights, tinted a peculiar orange, strangely at odds with the rest of the room: a series of surgically clean stainless steel benches took up the centre with more of them ranged around the edges, interspersed with huge, fridge-like pieces of equipment. It was more like a morgue than a laboratory. The air was clean and antiseptic-smelling, and reminded Ace, uncomfortably, of hospitals. The whole place had obviously been refitted, the only concession to the past being a wooden panel on the wall, with six fat brown Bakelite light switches mounted on it.

The Doctor was slowly drifting round the room like a curious and

slightly befuddled ghost, opening cupboards, running his fingers along shelves of carefully labelled glass jars of white and blue powders and crystals, dear liquids, substances that looked like milk or gravy. A door set into the far corner of the left-hand wall led, presumably, to other rooms. The Doctor picked up a beaker of clear fluid from a bench and examined it before giving it a sniff and placing it back on the glinting steel surface. Having completed his circuit of the laboratory, he returned to Ace and tapped his chin with the handle of his umbrella.

‘Well?’ she asked. ‘Alien bodysnatching conspiracy or what?’

‘Hmm? Oh, all fairly humdrum, Ace. Centrifuge, gas chromatograph. Nothing particularly out of place.’ He looked vaguely disappointed and Ace’s face fell.

‘So we’re looking for a missing woman and someone with minimalist tastes in interior décor, are we?’

The Doctor patted his lip and cocked his head on one side.

‘And, of course, there are the lipmarks on that beaker.’ He gestured at it.

‘So? Someone wanted a glass of water and couldn’t be bothered getting a cup.’

‘Maybe, Ace, maybe. Only it’s not water. It’s ammonium sulphate.’

‘And that’s bad?’

‘For any human that drank it, yes.’

‘I don’t understand. What’s happened to you?’

George looked Harry up and down. Gone was the slightly tired, slightly feeble friend who could hardly remember – any more than he could – anything beyond last week. He’d been replaced by a somehow taller, somehow *stronger* man, whose eyes blazed where once they’d been tired and dull, whose chin jutted defiantly where once it had drooped. George sat on the bed in Harry’s room as Harry paced up and down, impatient, irritated and almost incandescent with energy.

Harry looked away, ran his hand through his hair. ‘It’s only a matter of time, and then you’ll remember too.’ He turned back to his friend and placed a hand on his shoulder. George almost recoiled at the pent-

up anger and rage that he felt in that touch, that he could see in Harry's eyes.

'Trust me,' said Harry.

'So what is it that you remember? You said everything? So the treatment's worked? Why are you so reluctant to talk about it?' George reached out his hand to his friend's arm, but something held him back, stopped him from actually touching him. 'This is what we're here for, what we've always wanted. For God's sake Harry, don't shut me out of it now.'

Harry gave a low chuckle – almost a growl – and shook his head slowly. 'Believe me, George, when the time comes for you

– and it will – you'll see it for yourself.' Harry put his hand to his forehead and turned away. 'D'you mind if I get some sleep now?'

he said, his voice suddenly a dry husk of what it had been before.

George hadn't thought: this must be taking it out of his friend. He raised himself from the bed, knees protesting painfully, and crossed to the door.

'Promise me you'll bang on the wall if, well, if... you know...

if you need anything.'

Harry nodded slowly as George wished him goodnight and left.

Harry listened as George padded down the corridor and went into his own room, closing the door behind him. He sat down on the bed, cradling his head in his hands. It was all there – all the memories, all the images. As if someone had taken a sledgehammer to the walls around him, walls he'd known for so long that he'd forgotten they were there. He remembered places, faces.. everything. But 'everything' seemed too small a word for it. He had his life back – *his life*.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, unable to block out the torrent of sights and sounds that rushed through his head, a torrent so violent and chaotic that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't hold anything for long enough to look at it, to listen to it. It was like someone had crammed huge slabs of someone else into his head, crowbarring them in willy-nilly. Surely the memories should have been familiar if they were his own. He opened his eyes and stared at the flowers on the curtains, trying to damp down the fires that burned

in his mind. Relieved, he felt them subside a little although they continued to flicker, filling up all the dusty corners and shadowy nooks with bronze flame.

Harry waited another few minutes, sniffing back the tears that he didn't realise he'd been crying, and then rose from the bed, turned out the light and set off down the corridor. A fire had been ignited inside him – a fire that needed feeding.

Mrs Wesley stood in front of the bathroom mirror and tried to pinpoint the exact moment that the world had jumped back into focus. It was as though she'd spent her whole life looking out through dirty windows, not realising that they were dirty because they were all she'd known. And now someone had finally given the glass a good clean. Suddenly, everything seemed sharper, more in focus: she could remember names, places; she could remember what she'd had for tea the previous day; and she could remember why she was here – she was here to be cured.

And – unless all this was another cruel part of her illness –

the treatment seemed to be working. She remembered her knitting and shook her head, half in amusement, half in horror at how she must have looked to others – knitting and re-knitting the same square of green wool, day in, day out. But that was all over. She stared at the woman in the mirror, realising with a growing smile how attractive she actually was. She tugged a few errant strands of brown hair into place and collected her accoutrements together.

Moments later, she closed the bathroom door behind her, toilet bag clutched in her arm – and jumped as she felt a hand on her shoulder.

'Oh Harry!' she exclaimed, her laughter defusing the hysteria that she felt bubble up inside her. 'Don't do that!'

Harry smiled – but not the cheery, cheeky smile that Mrs Wesley was familiar with. This was more of a sneer, cold and calculating. Mrs Wesley wasn't sure she liked it very much. In the past couple of days, there were quite a lot of things that she was realising she didn't like about this place. Maybe they'd been there all along and she just hadn't seen them.

She looked at Harry, feeling suddenly very vulnerable. His hand stayed on her shoulder.

'What's wrong?' she asked..

‘Everything’s fine,’ he replied in a soft voice. ‘I just thought I’d offer you an escort to your room, Doris.’

She pulled her head back a little and raised an eyebrow: she wasn’t keen on being addressed in so familiar a way, especially by someone she hardly knew. ‘You seem different, Harry – are you alright?’

‘Oh yes, Doris – I’m more than alright.’ His eyes gleamed.

He smiled devilishly and tapped the side of his head. ‘It’s all coming back to me. All of it.’

‘That’s wonderful, Harry,’ she beamed, relaxing a little. ‘I must admit, I’m feeling a lot better myself.’ She took a closer look at this new, invigorated Harry.

As if he’d read her mind, he smiled. ‘I feel like a new man,’ he said, and slipped his arm into hers.

The numbers streamed past her like bubbles rising from the depths, splitting, multiplying as they fled upwards into the night.

Part of her felt detached enough to observe the clear, mathematical beauty around her, to even make sense of some tiny, tiny part of it all. The rest of her was fenced off from her perceptions as if someone had neatly bisected her brain, leaving half of it to be integrated into whatever vast matrix spread around her, half of it to observe, neutrally, uninvolved.

She felt an itch, deep inside her head, but she had no body with which to scratch it.

She watched the numbers coalesce and crystallize around her, fading out of the velvet darkness, rainbowing through colours she never knew existed. The symmetries were beautiful, breathtaking. But just as she began to understand a fraction of what they were all about, her attention would be caught by something else, like a butterfly in a poppy field, unable to settle.

But it didn’t matter. Wherever she turned, there was some new puzzle, some fresh algorithm being enacted around her. And attention, she knew, wasn’t required. Her presence – her conscious awareness – was almost a side-effect, an observer powerless to interfere in the abstract machineries that wheeled around her.

She had no idea how long she'd been here – if ‘here’ meant anything at all. Some internal clock told her it was just a few hours but for all she knew it could have been days or weeks. But for now, she tried not to think about that: there was too much to see and experience here.

This was pure, pure heaven – particularly for a physicist like Joyce.

Chapter Five

Ace and the Doctor slipped quietly out through the darkened kitchen and stood at the back of Graystairs. The evening was cold and silent, and the Doctor could feel frost in the air. They had spent a fruitless fifteen minutes slipping through the shadows of Graystairs, listening to the comforting sounds from the television room, the laughter of the residents; they’d tip-toed along thickly carpeted corridors hearing gentle snores from early retirers; and they’d tried a couple of door handles, discovering only fitful slumber. But no Joyce and no Norma. And impending bedtime meant that they’d come increasingly close to being caught, so they’d decided to leave and try again later.

The Doctor watched Ace blowing thoughtful clouds of steam into the air, glowing in the pale moonlight. She caught him staring.

‘Well?’ she asked.

‘Very, thank you.’

‘You know what I mean. What now?’

‘I think a return visit is called for, but not until everyone’s gone to bed.’ He glanced at his new pocket watch. ‘Give them a few hours and then we’ll see. Meanwhile...’

‘Somewhere warm would be nice, Ace ventured, another frosty cloud escaping her lips. Suddenly, she turned her head at what sounded like the soft crunch of footsteps around the corner of the house. The Doctor followed her gaze. ‘I was going to tell you before, she hissed, pressing him back into the darkness of the kitchen wall. ‘I got a really weird feeling earlier –

like someone was watching me. In the village and then in the woods near Graystairs. Maybe I’ve got a stalker.’

‘Or an overactive imagination.’

In silence, they scanned the darkness, but no one – and nothing –

came around the corner.

‘See?’ the Doctor said eventually. ‘Now come on – we’ve got a missing woman to find.’

As the two of them rounded the corner of the house and headed for the steps that led down to the car park, the Doctor glanced back at the darkness they’d left behind, and gave a tiny nod.

In his room, Harry sat on the bed and locked his fingers together, trying to stop himself from shaking. He closed his eyes but Mrs Wesley’s face screamed out at him from the darkness and he opened them in shock. It was how it had been – how it always would be. He looked at the backs of his hands, pictured them holding the pillow down over the woman’s face, clenching; he remembered his pulse racing as he pulled his head back, trying to avoid her thrashing arms. And as she deflated under him, like a battery-powered toy running down, he’d seen her knitting on the dressing table...

Like a man who’s been fed on bread and water for a lifetime, it was as if he was suddenly faced with a banquet. He had to feed. It was only right, after all. Mrs Wesley’s mind may have cleared, but she was *other*. She didn’t matter.

Harry flexed his fingers as, unbidden, a single word came to his lips.

Tulk.

The Doctor browsed the litter of yellowed cards blu-tacked to the window of the post office while Ace stomped her feet and rubbed her hands noisily and pointedly. Eventually, her patience exhausted, she dug him in the ribs.

‘No mention of Joyce then? *Woman lost. Please call. Reward.*

That kind of thing?’

He waved her flippancy away with a scowl and pointed to a number of the cards. ‘Rather a lot of dogs and cats gone missing recently, don’t you think?’

‘Maybe she’s set up a pet sanctuary.’

‘The devil’s in the details, Ace. You can learn a lot about a place by looking at its small ads.’

'And what do a lot of missing dogs and cats tell you, then?

Apart from there are a lot of careless owners?'

'Dogs and cats don't go missing on this scale, Ace. Not in a place like this. They value their homes and food and warmth too much.' He stopped and frowned, drumming his fingers on his chin. 'Something someone said earlier... sheep. Missing sheep.'

Ace peered at the window, the cards and their scrawly handwriting bleached out in the orange sodium light of the streetlamp, and shook her head. 'No missing sheep here –' She stopped suddenly and turned to him. 'The kid – the kid who told me how to get to Graystairs. He said something about missing sheep – and wolves.'

'Wolves? Around here?' He shook his head vaguely.

'Doubtful.' Suddenly he hooked his umbrella over his arm and looked up and down the street, frowning, as if something incredibly important had occurred to him. 'Right,' he said decisively. 'You can keep yourself entertained for a while, can't you?'

'How hard can it be? We've been here a whole day and the biggest threat we've faced has been Megan's cooking.'

But he wasn't listening. With barely a backward glance, he set off in the direction of the TARDIS. 'See you back at the hotel,' he called over his shoulder. Ace could only stand and watch him go, wondering what had suddenly got into him.

'But what about Michael?' she said quietly.

But he was too far away to hear. Maybe he hadn't spotted the fact that Michael just happened to have been one of the men in the photo in Joyce's mum's room. She had been about to suggest that they find where he'd pitched up his tent and have a word: for all they knew, Joyce had decided to spend a night under canvas. But he obviously had better things to do. She felt a little slighted, and wondered if his disappearance was connected with whatever had happened aboard the TARDIS.

The wind was whipping up around her and she could feel a faint drizzle in the air. Michael's earlier directions had been vague; but the village was small, and the bright moon overhead cast a cold light over the houses and fields. The lighted street through the village led, alarmingly quickly, onto a darkened country road. Having grown up

amongst the suburban bustle of Perivale, Ace was surprised and a little disconcerted at how eerily quiet the countryside was, and after fifteen minutes of walking she began to wonder whether she shouldn't go back. But Michael hadn't been telling the whole truth earlier, and she wanted to know why.

She soon found his camp site – a vague glimmer of warm orange through a hedge, away in the corner of a field. The ground was wet and sticky and sucked at her boots as she leaped over the nearest gate. 'I should get a clothing allowance for all this,' she muttered to herself. Stepping tentatively across the grass, she made her way across the field to the tent and the sputtering fire outside it. Hunched over it, white enamel mug in hand, was Michael. Ace gave a deliberate cough, and he spluttered and spilled his tea.

'Who's there?' He turned sharply, his eyes wide, and Ace noticed how his hand went automatically to his side.

'Only me,' Ace said, dropping down to join him beside the fire. 'Now, how about telling me exactly what you're doing in Muirbridge. And yes, a cuppa would be lovely.'

The Doctor paused near the war memorial in the centre of the village. From its coal-black shadow, he watched as Ace walked off down the lane and vanished into the night. Moments later, someone stepped out of a side street that led back towards Graystairs. They held themselves oddly, pained, and the Doctor could see that they were limping. In thoughtful silence, he watched as the figure headed up through the village in the direction of the hillside where the TARDIS stood.

In silence, Ace watched Michael brew the tea and throw a few more sticks on the fire. Her front felt lovely and warm, but she could feel the drizzle soaking into the back of her jacket. He still hadn't answered her question. She watched him carefully as he handed her a mug. He seemed to have changed from the bright, carefree – and eminently fanciable – man she'd met that afternoon. Now he was secretive and taciturn and loath to look her in the eye. They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes until Ace set her cup down on the wet grass and said: 'Right, enough secrets.'

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. Even in the flickering firelight, his eyes still managed to shine blue. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'This afternoon, you never got round to telling me why you're here.'

‘What’s to tell? Just a camping trip.’

Ace snorted. ‘Yeah, and the rest. How come when I mentioned we were friends of Joyce’s you went all funny on me?’

‘Did I?’

Ace took a gulp of her tea. Staring away into the night, she casually said: ‘Why should you be so suspicious of Joyce’s friends, then?’

‘You’ve lost me,’ he said, but Ace could sense an awkwardness in his voice. ‘I don’t know who this Joyce woman is.’

‘Really? Well that’s weird, ‘cos her mother’s got a photo of you and her by the side of her bed.’

She saw Michael’s shoulders slump, slightly, in defeat.

‘So you’ve come looking for your mum. Big deal. what’s the big secret?’

‘How do you know Mum?’

‘It’s the Doctor that knows her – he said something about how she was a friend of someone called Liz Shaw. That mean anything to you? He got a postcard from your mum, saying something was going on here, and asked him to come and help.’

Michael looked away, eyes narrowing, that same clenching of the jaw she’d noticed earlier that day. She wasn’t sure whether it was the Doctor or Liz Shaw that had struck a nerve.

‘Do you know the Doctor, then?’ she asked, suddenly not so sure that she wanted to know the answer. There was something in Michael’s eyes, something in the set of his body that told her that she might be about to hear something uncomfortable.

‘I know of him. Everyone knows of him.’

‘Everyone? I know he likes to get about a bit, but that’s pushing it a bit.’

‘I mean everyone at UNIT.’

‘United Nations Intelligence Taskforce UNIT?’

‘Saving the Earth from invasion by aliens UNIT,’ he smiled.

‘Are you sure you should be telling me that? Isn’t it a national secret or something?’

‘You tell me – you seem to know enough about it. I’m sure the Doctor’s filled you in on it. So, what else do you know about UNIT?’ He leaned back, the firelight catching his eyes.

‘For a start, I know you work for them,’ Ace said. ‘In the photo that your gran’s got by her bed, you’re in a UNIT

uniform, and when I saw you this afternoon, you said you were shopping for rations. Not a word that people usually use when they’ve just bought some bread and milk.’

‘So you’re here to spy on me, are you? Is that it?’

‘Hey, don’t have a go at me! I don’t know what’s gone on between you and the Doctor, but I’m not from UNIT. And from what the Doctor’s told me, neither is he: he just helps them out when they’re busy.’

‘Oh, little Miss Innocent, are you?’

‘I haven’t got time for this.’ Ace got to her feet and picked up her rucksack. She was cold, wet and tired, and the last thing she wanted was a round of verbal sparring. ‘What are you so defensive about? The Doctor came here ‘cos your mum asked for help –’

‘Have you seen her?’ Michael cut in.

Ace looked down at him, wanting to say no, wanting to walk away and leave him no wiser. But she couldn’t. ‘I think something happened to her up at Graystairs,’ she said reluctantly, and quickly related the pitiful amount that she and the Doctor had discovered so far. He chewed the back of his hand thoughtfully, as Ace watched him. She couldn’t pinpoint it, but there was still something he was holding back. All she could see was a man whose mother had disappeared, and who had some sort of unresolved grudge with the Doctor. She sat down again. He pulled out a battered packet of fags and offered her one.

‘No thanks – tried ‘em once. They don’t quite go with high explosives. Anyway,’ she continued hastily, forestalling his next question, ‘how long have you been up here?’

‘Just a couple of days.’

'So how come you haven't found her yet? Been to Graystairs? The B&B?'

He shook his head slowly. 'It's not that simple,' he said.

'You come all this way, and then don't finish the job?'

'It's more complicated than that,' he said, clearly struggling with whether he should tell her something or other. Ace shivered, despite the fire, feeling her patience draining away into the cold grass beneath her.

The Doctor stood on the ridge staring into the darkness. Behind him lay the oasis of light that was the village; and beyond that, up a gently sloping hill through the wood, was Graystairs. But his attention was focused in the other direction, on the cottage squatting in the shadow of the slope beneath him. A thin snail-trail of smoke, smeared out by the wind, coiled away into the sky. There were no lights.

Cats and dogs and sheep and wolves, he thought to himself.

These are a few of my favourite things. He tensed as he heard soft footsteps behind him – footsteps that spoke of injury, and trepidation. Without turning, he spoke into the night.

'You do know that we almost saw you back at Graystairs, don't you?' He looked back slowly, his eyes narrow and hard. 'I think we need to have a little chat.'

It took the Doctor about half an hour to reach the decrepit cottage, his sense of unease growing as he approached. And as he swung the rusted gate aside, the unease was exacerbated by a faint, sickly scent. He paused at the door, eyes narrowed, every sense stretched. With just a little effort, he tuned out the thin soughing of the wind, but all he could hear from within the cottage was a dark, echoey silence. His nostrils wrinkled and he knew instantly what had become of the missing sheep and pets.

The door was open, and the Doctor flinched as he turned the handle and the smell of putrefaction curled through the widening crack. His night-acclimatized eyes took in the tatty furniture, blankets and cushions, limned by the soft, winking glow of a grid of lights set in the broad, bevelled edge of something that, grotesquely, resembled a coffin. Its side was yellowed and stained.

The Doctor glanced back into the night before stepping over the

threshold and closing the door behind him. The stench that surrounded him was thick, almost palpable, and spoke of the depravity of the place more than simply death and decay. As he made his way gingerly towards the coffin, his foot caught something small and hard which skittered and spun away across the floor. The almost denuded skull of a sheep, a few bloody, tattered remains of flesh still clinging to the blood-washed bone, fetched up against the coffin with a bump. He shook his head in sorrow and disbelief and placed the palms of his hands against the lid. He didn't need to open it. He knew exactly what it was –

a fleshsuit tank – a fairly new development from the Fleshsmiths. Could there be Fleshsmiths around here? It didn't seem their sort of thing, really: their forte was in supplying prosthetics, devices – *bodies* – to others; they worked from behind the scenes, selling their services to those who could afford them. At least now he knew what had happened to the missing animals. He pulled his hands away from the device, rubbing the oily residue from the lid between his fingers.

Someone was walking around in a suit made from living, recycled biomatter.

Ace felt slightly light-headed from Michael's brandy. But after what seemed like hours of getting nowhere with him, she'd decided that there were more important things to do than to sit in awkward silence while he steadfastly refused to talk about anything of interest. Their entire conversation had been about Scotland, the weather and the Falklands conflict. Every time she'd tried to bring it back to UNIT, Joyce or the Doctor, Michael had steered it away again. Maybe she'd been trying too hard. Finally, heaving herself to her feet and wobbling rather uncoolly, she'd announced she was off. The relief in his eyes was almost insulting, but she knew how he felt: if he didn't want to talk, then he didn't want to talk. The brandy had imbued her with a certain bravado, and she decided she ought to get off her backside and *do something*.

As they said their goodnights – awkward and devoid of the flirtations that Ace was beginning to wonder whether she'd imagined earlier – and she tramped back across the field, she remembered that the Doctor had said to meet her at the hotel.

She presumed that the plan was to return to Graystairs and have a nosey around under cover of darkness, but she had a niggling feeling that, if she did go back, he wouldn't be there. Maybe she should steal a march on him, go straight there. A warm bed and something to eat

was quite high on her list of priorities – but even higher was another look at the laboratory: the Doctor might have found a beaker of poison, but she was determined that she was going to find something much more incriminating.

As she made her way back across the moonlit fields, the frosty ground crunching beneath her boots, she found herself growing uncharacteristically maudlin. Since she and the Doctor had arrived in future London, no one had seemed to want to be straight with her. Secrets and lies, she thought bitterly. No, that was unfair. Just secrets. And maybe things that the Doctor simply didn't know about: he couldn't know everything, after all.

And maybe Michael was exaggerating – bitter and unhappy, but exaggerating. She took a deep breath to clear the fogginess in her head; her throat and stomach still burned from the brandy and she remembered that she hadn't eaten for hours.

Clambering back over the fence, she nearly tripped. Swearing loudly, she told herself to shush. Maybe she should have stayed with Michael and slept the drink off. But there was no way she was going to go back there now, just to have him laugh at her.

She checked her watch – nearly three in the morning. If she could get back into Graystairs without being caught, then she'd have a better chance to poke around, find more evidence. Maybe even find Joyce. Maybe she should have told Michael where she was going, got him to come with her. No, bad move. She didn't know whether she really trusted him yet. Better to stick with the one person you could trust.

The sensitivity of Ace's hearing seemed to have been turned up from 'attentive' to 'paranoid': every crack of a twig, every rustle, every innocent animal noise had her glancing around, expecting her stalker to launch himself – or herself, she realised

– at her from the darkness. She picked up a branch and hefted it clumsily. If nothing else, it gave her a bit of extra confidence.

There were still lights on at Graystairs: a couple of ground floor ones, one first floor and one on the third floor. She grinned as she imagined Connie and Jessie sneaking down to the kitchens for a midnight feast.

The door, as she'd expected, was locked; so she slipped round the side of the house, and after a few minutes found a ground floor sash window that was open – in fact the frame at the bottom was splintered and chipped, so perhaps this had been the site of a recent

break-in. With a bit of effort, she managed to get it open, wincing at the rumbling of the sash weights in the frame. She was in the residents' lounge, the armchairs painted with silver moonlight, the air curiously dry and dead.

She slid like a shadow to the foot of the stairs, paused for a moment as she heard muffled voices from upstairs – the bleeding out into the real world of some elderly nightmare – and headed for the cellar door. As she opened it, she smelled something both welcoming and disturbing. Someone was cooking bacon down there. Her stomach growled.

She found the light switch, and winced at the brilliance of the single bulb as she flicked it. Blinking away the after-images, she tiptoed down the stairs to the lab – pristine, sharp and, thankfully, deserted. The smell of bacon grew stronger, and she felt her stomach rumble again – loud enough, she was sure, for the mystery chef to be able to hear. For a few moments she waited at the foot of the stairs. She thought she could hear noises in the distance, through the far doorway where, she presumed, there was a kitchen. Scanning the room, she smiled as she caught sight of a half-eaten bacon butty on one of the worktops. In a single, deft movement, she ran over, snatched it up and took a bite. She swallowed greedily and took another, moving sideways towards the other doorway, keeping her back pressed against the workbenches that ran around the room. She could definitely hear noises footsteps growing louder. It sounded like someone coming down a flight of stairs like the ones she'd just used, but ahead of her, through the kitchen. She froze and reluctantly put the remains of her sandwich down. Holding her breath – which now seemed louder than the grumblings of her stomach – she strained to hear what was happening around the corner.

And then she heard a muffled woman's voice give a cry of surprise and a dull, metal clang, like someone banging their head on a saucepan.

Panic took hold, and Ace sprinted across the room, back towards the stairway.

In mid-stride, halfway to the stairs, she vanished.

Chapter Six

Whereas Ace had entered Graystairs through a side window, the Doctor just marched straight up to the front door, fiddled with the handle and he was in. He stood in silence for a moment, sniffing the

air. Strange how things smelled so different at night -

dark and predatory, full of anticipation, full of menace. His favourite time.

'We're not in Kansas now, Tom,' Ace whispered to herself.

The air was damp and heavy, and she felt a cold, unwelcome clamminess pressing at her skin, even through her clothes. She was in a dark, church-like space, full of unfamiliar creaks and drips. Her first thought was that she was on a submarine – the floor beneath her feet was a coarse metal grating, the wall to her side curved away overhead like a hi-tech buttress. Its surface was cold, moist metal, a sheen of condensation running down her fingers into the cuff of her jacket as she brushed her fingers on it. Puddles of curdled water lay at her feet, scummed over, green.

Where the hell was she? And how the hell had she got there?

She glanced back but all she saw was a dark corridor, curving away from her. Pale bulbs of light, set high in the arching walls, cast a cadaverous glow. Out of the frying pan...

She must have come through some sort of transmat from Gray-stairs, she realised. Checking the walls nearby, she saw two thicker strips of metal, like slightly bent railway sleepers, that seemed to have been bolted onto the walls, just at the point where she'd appeared. Presumably, the transmat generators. She smiled to herself: a beaker of poison, Doctor? Huh! Let me tell you about the transmat and the secret base!

She hitched her rucksack onto her back and, feeling more Scooby Doo than James Bond, started exploring.

Like an ancient, steel cathedral, it felt abandoned – but still inhabited by the spirits of the dead. It creaked and groaned and pinged around her, and she found herself splashing through countless puddles of stagnant water. The air smelled of rust and algae, and it was only when she found a few control panels that she began to wonder where this place actually was. And the more she looked around, the more she felt certain: this wasn't just some secret hideaway this was a spaceship. Moments later, she stepped into a much brighter chamber – one that hummed and fizzed and beeped with all the sounds you might expect from a spaceship: hoo, Doctor! Just you wait!

Arrayed round the room on sloping couches, their feet pointing

towards the centre of the chamber, were at least a dozen people.

There was a progression in the equations around her. Her realization of it was more instinctive than informed. Joyce still felt that same sense of bewondered detachment as each new piece of the puzzle slotted itself into the whole, and then fell away, like huge icebergs of data detaching themselves, drifting off on new adventures. It was all to do with frequencies, she realized. Familiar equations formed around her as she made the connection, curious butterflies around a particularly attractive new flower. Wasps around a honey pot. She could see Bessel functions and... weren't those Cantor sets? She reached out a finger she didn't possess and *touched* a set of numbers. They blossomed into others, fractal sequences, and she pulled her hand back, worried that she'd damaged them somehow. But the Eigenvalues of the matrix remained constant. She scanned the rows and columns. Something wasn't quite right. Not yet. There was a missing sequence. . She could see a dark gap in the streams of numbers, an invisible question mark over it. Joyce's non-existent brow furrowed as she tried to work out what was missing –

Ace gazed at the bodies around her. Their faces were illuminated by pale spotlights, and at the head of each bench was a twinkling pillar of electronic equipment. She scanned the faces around her

– most were elderly, but amongst them were a couple of younger people, a middle-aged woman – and a woman who could only be Joyce Brunner.

Ace dropped her rucksack and rushed over to the sleeping woman. She recognized her face from the photograph in Norma's room – a thin, taut face, dark hair tied back severely.

Joyce could be quite attractive if she made an effort, thought Ace, but at the moment her face was pale and drawn, dark shadows under her eyes. She followed the tangle of cables that ran from the electronic pillar and saw that they led to the nape of Joyce's neck. Gently, she rolled Joyce's head on its side, and saw that they spread out into a silvery net, seemingly embedded in her skin. Ace gave an experimental tug, reluctant to pull too hard in case it did any damage. She was surprised when, with a high-pitched squeak, the filaments seemed to withdraw into themselves, shrinking to a shiny nub the size of Ace's fingertip, just below her hairline. Joyce's eyes snapped open.

Ace jumped back, panicking that she'd done some irreversible damage as Joyce opened her mouth –

– and screamed as light flooded her brain, burning through her eyes. Joyce clamped her hands over her ears to shut out the sickening din that lanced into them. Her stomach heaved, and only with an immense effort did she prevent herself from throwing up.

‘Stop it!’ Joyce screamed. ‘Make it stop! Please, make it stop!’

She felt someone grab her wrists and pull them away from her head. The light scorching into her head faded as a dark shape passed in front of her, making noises that she knew, deep down, were supposed to make some sort of sense, but she couldn’t fit them together. Like an abstract jigsaw with no box, no picture.

Something pulled at her, changing her orientation, and the nausea punched her in the stomach again.

‘God, my head,’ moaned Joyce, struggling to sit up on the bench. She squinted at the girl in front of her, confused.

Everything was fuzzed over with a strange, multicoloured halo and she felt sick. Her mouth tasted sharp, metallic.

‘Are you OK?’ the girl asked.

‘I don’t know I feel dreadful.’ She looked around. She was in some sort of church – a wet, clammy church that smelled of old fishponds and rusty oil cans. Dim light filtered down from above. The room was filled with benches like the one she was now sitting on, each of them with a sleeping figure on it.

‘Come on,’ said the girl, trying to help her up. ‘We need to get out of here.’

Another jolt of pain stabbed at her stomach as she got unsteadily to her feet, and she had to sit down again.

The girl glanced edgily at her. ‘Look, have a rest while I try to get some of these others unhooked.’

Joyce watched as the girl crossed to an elderly woman and began to fiddle around with a cable that seemed to run into the back of the woman’s head. What was she doing? She touched the back of her neck, and pulled her hand back sharply as she felt something hard and metallic embedded there. She looked around at the others, all of them apparently sleeping – and, she guessed, muzzily, all with the same metal things in the backs of their necks. She closed her eyes, faint

after-images of numbers and equations dancing on her retinas. She felt sick again, her arms heavy.

‘Where are we?’

‘You don’t want to know,’ the girl replied as the woman on whom she was working began to moan, thrashing her head from side to side. Joyce raised her hand, opened her mouth to ask the girl if she knew what she was doing. The girl’s words and tone of voice suddenly registered with her, as if they’d been spoken minutes ago, smeared out into long, time-delayed echoes.

‘If I didn’t want to know,’ replied Joyce tartly, wincing at the icy needles that stabbed her temples, ‘I wouldn’t have asked.’

‘Fine – we’re in a spaceship and we got here through a transmat. That OK for you?’

The girl helped the elderly, white-haired woman into a sitting position, and Joyce realized that the look of terror and confusion on her face must have mirrored her own.

‘Look,’ said Joyce, ‘I don’t know who you are, or what this is all about, but I asked a civil question and I think –’

‘Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Help get Jessie – it is Jessie, isn’t it? - sorted whilst I wake Connie up.’

Joyce bristled at the girl’s tone: as well as sarcastic and rude, she was also bossy. And Joyce wasn’t used to being ordered around by someone as young as this. Reluctantly, she slid to her feet and went over to help the elderly woman who was squinting, trying to cover her eyes and ears simultaneously.

‘Who are you?’ the woman moaned as Joyce tried, feebly, to comfort her.

‘I’m Joyce. Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of here. Your name’s Jessie, isn’t it?’ She glanced over at the girl who nodded.

‘Well everything’s going to be fine, Jessie.’

‘Where’s Ernest? I want Ernest! What have you done with him?’

‘Who’s Ernest?’

‘What have you done with him? He was here –’ Jessie looked around the room, her eyes wide with fear. Under her hand, Joyce could feel her shaking.

‘You’re the girl from Graystairs, aren’t you? Is he here? Is Ernest here?’ Joyce looked round the supine bodies, but Jessie wasn’t interested in them. She started rocking, silent tears streaming down her face. For a clear, cold moment, Joyce imagined that she saw her own mother there, terrified, lost. Only then did she realise that Jessie, and probably most of the other people in the chamber, was a patient at Graystairs. Was Mum here? She looked around again, but was relieved to find that she wasn’t. But amongst the faces, she was disturbed to see a couple of the staff that had been in Graystairs on her previous visit –

including the woman she thought of as ‘Matron’. The girl was unplugging another elderly woman – whose reaction, thankfully, seemed less extreme than Jessie’s. (And, Joyce noted with an awkward embarrassment, even less extreme than her own had seemed.) At least to her. As the third, well-built, brown-haired woman sat up, Jessie saw her and her crying stopped as she went over to comfort her

‘What is this horrid place?’ Jessie asked, cradling her friend’s head. Joyce looked to the girl for an answer.

‘It’s... I’m not sure. My name’s Ace, by the way, and this is Joyce. Come on, we have to get you and Connie out of here before someone comes.’ Ace ushered Jessie and Connie to their feet. ‘How do you know my name?’ asked Joyce.

‘I’m a friend of the Doctor. Now come on. I can’t imagine this place doesn’t have some sort of alarm. We have to get out.’

Joyce frowned. ‘Doctor? Doctor Menzies?’

‘No,’ Ace said with strained patience. ‘*The Doctor. Now come on!*’ Supporting Connie, Ace and Jessie began splashing their way through the puddles of water towards the arch of the doorway.

She paused only to pick up her rucksack and throw Joyce an irritated look, before the three of them shuffled out into the corridor.

‘What about all those poor people?’ wailed Connie, stopping in the doorway and looking back.

'Let's just get you out first,' Ace said as calmly as she could.

'Then I'll come back for the rest. OK?'

Connie nodded uncertainly, looking back to Jessie in the corridor for reassurance, before following her.

With a sinking, sickening feeling grasping at her stomach, Joyce cast a last look around the chamber of horrors and set off after the others.

As the Doctor padded down the corridor, he could hear the tatters of dreams, muttered grumbles, the occasional sob. All neatly boxed up in those little rooms, locked away out of sight.

He scanned the plaques on the doors: *The Iris Room*, *The Rose Room*, *The Violet Room*. One door, however, bore no name. He paused at it and saw that it was slightly ajar, a thin, cool breeze blowing through the gap. Opening it he saw a small staircase that led into darkness, both up and down. He remembered what Ace had said about her conversation with Claudette: the treatment room – not to mention this mysterious Mr Sooal – was up those stairs.

His feet tapping gently on the stone, he made his way cautiously up to the darkened landing where he stood in silence for a few moments, breathing in the musty air. Moonlight slanted in through a window set at the far end of the corridor, and, as he listened, he heard music from one of the rooms off the corridor – the sad strains of a woman singing opera. *La Traviata*. He paused and pressed his ear to the door, but all he could hear was the music: *Addio de Passato*, the heart-breaking goodbye to life from the opera's heroine, Violetta. The Doctor found his throat tightening as he was caught up in the haunting strings and woodwind, the tremulous voice. *Non lagrima o fore aura la mia fossa... neither tears nor flowers will my grave have.* .

He felt a twinge of guilt, eavesdropping on such personal sadness. Necessary it may be, but not very nice. From what Ace had said, this must be Sooal's room. He knew he ought to confront him, ask him face to face what was happening. But, just now, it seemed wrong. He felt like he was listening in on a funeral, on some private grief.

He turned away from the door. *Later*.

The treatment room, then. There were three other rooms –

one was empty and smelled of dust and damp as he opened the door a crack. Even in the faded ivory light from the landing window, he

could see that the second one was tiled white, clinical like the cellar laboratory. He dosed the door behind him as he fumbled for the light switch. Pale orange light flared from the spotlamp in the centre of the ceiling, casting a cone of bloody light downwards onto a chair, much like a dentist's. But this one, he noted grimly, had leather wrist and ankle restraints.

He ran the tips of his fingers over the headrest, noting the control panels that spread out from the chair's arms and the tray of decidedly non-terrestrial, air-powered hypodermics. He picked one up, sniffed it cautiously, and set it back down. As his gaze swept around the room, he noticed a clipboard hanging on the door of a large store cupboard: dates and times of treatment sessions, patients' names, all scribbled in an odd, angular handwriting. Most, it seemed, as he rifled through the pages, took place at night. Perhaps coming back here for a look in the wee hours wasn't such a clever idea.

Aliens curing Alzheimer's disease? Maybe he'd become cynical; maybe this was just some philanthropic creature who'd decided to come to Earth to do good. But then why was the atmosphere around Graystairs so cold, so dour? And then, of course, there was the fleshsuit tank in the cottage. His eyes flicked to the wrist restraints again.

He heard a noise from down the corridor and quickly moved to the doorway, flicking out the light.

An elderly woman, looked somewhat dazed, was being helped along by two younger men. One of them – Bernard? –

had shown the Doctor in earlier; the other was unfamiliar, with sandy hair and a grim, tired face. There was only one place they could be coming.

Steve wished they could wait until they got the residents into the treatment room before giving them the sedative: dragging them, half-dazed, up those stairs was a pain. But Doctor Menzies insisted, said they might be disturbed by the treatment room, the dentist's chair. So redecorate the treatment room, Menzies – or at least move it downstairs.

Norma was one of the better ones – at least she didn't turn into a bag of bones as soon as she'd swallowed her tablet, not like some of them; at least she could still bear her own weight.

Flicking on the light, Steve helped Bernard swing Norma into position, letting her slump down in the chair. Her eyes, unfocussed, tried to

take in the tiled room. But with a thin sigh she closed them and her breathing became slow and deep.

‘Norma’s under,’ Steve said, checking the dock on the wall.

‘Come on – that’s us done for tonight.’

Bernard grunted as they left the room. ‘I’ll be glad to be back on days,’ he said grumpily. ‘This place is too creepy at night.’ He glanced back at Norma, drowsing fitfully, and closed the door behind them.

Inside the store cupboard, the Doctor irritably pushed aside a couple of hanging labcoats. Squeezed in between cardboard boxes and two slim filing cabinets, he was grateful to hear the receding voices and the closing of the door. He gave it another minute, just to make sure, and then cautiously opened the door.

Flopped in the dentist’s chair, arms folded in her lap, was Norma. He listened to her breathing for a moment.

‘Norma... can you hear me?’

Her lips moved silently. He took her hand and closed his eyes. Moments later, her eyes flicked open and she stared at him, a curious frown on her face.

‘Just a message from Joyce,’ he said.

‘Who are you?’ She snatched her hand from his.

‘I’m the Doctor.’

‘You’re not Doctor Menzies. Or Doctor Kale. Have I seen you before?’

She struggled to sit up in the chair.

‘I’m a good friend of your daughter. She asked me to come and help.’

‘Help? Help what? What’s happened to Joyce?’

‘That’s what I’m here to find out.’

‘Something’s happened to her.’ It was a statement. Norma’s eyes narrowed as she tried to remember...

‘When did you last see her?’ asked the Doctor.

Norma shook her head, confused. ‘I... I can’t remember.’

She closed her eyes slowly, swallowing painfully and looked up into the Doctor’s eyes, her own suddenly so full of fear. ‘Help me,’ she said. ‘Please... help me.’

The Doctor couldn’t bring himself to nod, couldn’t bring himself to make a promise that he wasn’t sure he could keep.

He’d done that before. He couldn’t do it again.

‘Just close your eyes,’ he said. ‘Close your eyes Norma, and try to tell me what you can about Joyce, about the last time you saw her.’

‘I was... in my room. Yes... and she came to see me. But there was someone else there first, someone else with Megan.’

An expression of distaste mingled with fascination passed across her fine features. ‘He’s... he’s all white. Pale. Red eyes – no, pink.

He’s a... what d’you call them... Albanian?’

‘An albino?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, he’s... one of those. He’s smiling at me, coming towards me. He has something in his hand. He’s telling me that it’s just a little shot. “Part of the treatment,” he says.’

She shuddered and tried to pull her hand away from the Doctor’s; but he held firm.

‘What now Norma?’

‘Then he says something to Megan something about... a woman? Tracy Chambers? Stacy Chambers?’ Norma’s voice wandered away with a sigh. ‘I’m too tired... too sleepy...’

‘Try to stay awake, Norma. I need you to tell me what happened next. And about this woman.’

She shook her head. ‘Sleepy... too sleepy.’ Her head wobbled unsteadily, her chin drooping down towards her blue bedjacket.

The Doctor shook his head. Norma had been too far under the influence of the sedative she had obviously been given. He held her hand firmly and dosed his eyes. ‘Wake up Norma,’ he whispered.

Seconds later, she gave a little jerk and opened her eyes. She smiled apologetically. ‘Sorry, I must have nodded off.’ For a moment, she was disorientated – and then she suddenly remembered that they’d been talking about Joyce. She snatched her hand from the Doctor’s again. ‘What’s happened to Joyce?’

‘Nothing, hopefully,’ the Doctor said. ‘And I’m going to make sure it stays that way.’

He knew he could have hypnotized her again, had another go. But not now. From down the corridor came the sound of a door opening. He looked down at Norma and, on a whim, pulled his fobwatch from his pocket. He pressed it into her trembling hand. ‘A present from Joyce,’ he said simply.

He crossed to the door of the treatment room and as he cracked it open he heard Norma quietly talking to herself. He looked back to see her, eyes closed and palms pressed together around the silvery liquid shape of the watch.

‘Lord I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...’

Connie and Jessie were still in shock – which actually made it easier to chivvy them along the corridor to the transmat. They seemed happy that someone was making decisions for them.

This was clearly all too much for them to take in – although Joyce was struggling to get a grasp on it all herself.

‘I’ll go through first,’ Ace said. ‘Joyce, can you make sure Connie and Jessie go through OK and then follow them?’

There’s a chance that the place will be crawling with staff when we get back, so you need to get Connie and Jessie to safety, and you need to find the Doctor. Tell him what’s happened – that there’s a transmat in the cellar that leads to a spaceship. Got that?’

Joyce nodded, still bristling slightly from being ordered about.

‘Right – see you on the other side.’ With a deep breath, Ace took a couple of steps forwards and vanished. Joyce winced as Jessie gave a shriek.

Through the gap in the treatment room door, the Doctor saw a man who fitted not only Claudette’s description, but Norma’s too: thin, nervous, pale skin, bald head. As he left his room, Sooal glanced up

and down the corridor suspiciously. For a moment, the Doctor almost felt those albino eyes burning into him. And then the moment was past: Sooal looked at a small, greenish device in the palm of his hand and set off down the stairs.

But there was something else he'd noticed about him –

something that Ace hadn't mentioned. Perhaps Claudette hadn't noticed, or hadn't thought it was worth commenting on.

Something that he felt sure must be important. He slipped out of the treatment room and padded to the top of the stairs. He paused, momentarily, before silently descending the stone steps.

'What's happening?' demanded Sooal as he stood over the prone figure of Megan. She gave a groan and looked up at him. The right-hand side of her face was bruised, and there was dried blood under her nose. She was sprawled on the floor of the basement kitchen at the foot of the rear stairs, like a broken toy.

'That little bitch!' she hissed, her voice distorted by her swollen lip. She touched it tenderly and winced.

'Who? What's been going on? I come down here to find out who's been disconnecting the processors, and find you taking a nap! 'Who has? Where?'

Sooal gave a snort of disgust. 'Aboard the ship,' he said slowly, waving his datapad at her. 'Someone has been disconnecting the processors. We've lost three of them in the past half hour.'

'It's her! It must be!'

'So what happened?'

'She must have ambushed me – hit me with. .' She glanced around, and saw a huge, cast-iron pan on its side on the floor, a few yards away. 'With that. It must have been her. Or her grandad.'

'What *are* you wittering about? Who?'

'They came to look round yesterday – a girl and her grandad.

Her name was Ace or something stupid, and she called him "the Doctor" – a real dotty old duffer. I *knew* there was something odd about them. They vanished during tea – Enid said she'd seen them

wandering around.'

Sooal's jaw clenched. 'And you didn't think to tell me about them?'

Megan glared back at him, clearly not intending to be intimidated by him. 'Why should I have done? I thought they were just a girl and her grandfather, looking around the place.'

'If you'd remember what we're doing here instead of acting out the comic role that you spend most of your time practising, then you'd have kept an eye on them.'

'It puts the humans at their ease and keeps them coming back. If it wasn't for me, you'd have no patients here. Perhaps you should take a few social skills lessons yourself – no wonder you need to keep yourself hidden away in that attic –'

She flinched as he raised his hand. But after a moment, he lowered it and turned away. 'I suggest,' he said, barely containing his anger, 'that you find them. I'm going to the ship to find out what's happened there.'

'And if they're on board?'

Sooal patted his pocket where the outline of a bulbous gun was dearly visible. 'Then I'll take a leaf out of your book, and try out a new role for myself – that of executioner.'

In the laboratory, less than thirty feet away, Ace materialized in mid-stride out of thin air and dropped instinctively into a crouching position. She could hear voices through the doorway.

She stood aside, waiting impatiently for the others to follow her through the transmat. Jessie appeared next, looking even more bewildered than she had aboard the ship – followed by Connie and Joyce. Ace toyed with the idea of telling them that it was all just a dream, but there wasn't time.

'Get them out of here, and find the Doctor – we're booked in at your B&B,' she hissed to Joyce, jabbing her finger in the direction of the kitchen and pressing it to her lips. 'There's someone in there.'

'What about you?'

'I'm going back to see if I can revive some of the others –

now go!' Ace pointed to the stairs.

Shushing Connie and Jessie, Joyce marshalled them together and herded them towards the stairs as Ace stepped back through the transmat.

On the other side of the transmat field, Ace listened to the ship creak around her, and wondered if there was anybody else –

other than the sleepers – aboard with her. Perhaps there were weapons aboard that she could use to hold off any attackers. She shook her head. She ought to concentrate on waking the sleepers up and getting them out. Determinedly, she splashed off down the corridor.

From his position, three steps up from the kitchen, the Doctor listened with interest to Megan and Sooal's conversation. Nasty piece of work, he thought. Very nasty. And Megan wasn't much better – not least because she'd described him as a 'dotty old duffer'. Perhaps he should take it as a compliment on his acting ability.

And what did Sooal mean by 'processors'? He could only hope that he meant data rather than food. As Sooal left the room, the Doctor heard a noise. From above him came the sound of footsteps, growing louder. He was trapped.

Chapter Seven

Sooal stepped through the transmat, materialised in the corridor of the ship and paused as an idea struck him; he turned back and crouched down by the transmat's control box. With a few deft movements, he deactivated it: if there was anyone still aboard, he doubted that they'd be able to reactivate it. They were trapped.

As he reached the first chamber he paused and scanned the gloom ahead. Despite its condition, the ship still felt more like home to him than Graystairs. He knew it probably wouldn't last much longer – the crash had done considerable damage to it, and he doubted it would manage more than one short, final flight. But that was all it needed to manage. And for the time being, it served as an ideal research centre, well away from prying, senile eyes.

Ace stood in the centre of the chamber and wondered who she should try to bring round next. As she'd noted before, most looked like they could have been residents of Graystairs. Ace paused: could it be that this was the magical treatment that was curing them of their

Alzheimer's? She wondered if she'd done the right thing in disconnecting the others: maybe she'd set their treatments back; maybe even ruined them completely. But Joyce had been wired up, and she wasn't suffering from Alzheimer's.

She might have been snooty and ungrateful for Ace's rescue, but there had been no sign of dementia.

With renewed determination, Ace headed for one of the younger men and began to feel around behind his neck.

Jessie and Connie had locked themselves in Jessie's room, and now sat on the bed, holding each other through scared, uncertain tears. The woman – Joyce? – had told them to set out of Grystairs, to go as far as they could. But where was there to go?

And then she'd gone and left them.

'Wasn't that Norma's daughter?' Jessie asked as Connie dried her tears.

'Which one?'

'The young woman – not the girl. She was here earlier, asking about Norma.'

Connie shook her head. 'D'you think she knows what all this is about?'

Jessie shrugged weakly. 'I'm so scared, Connie. What's happening?'

Connie could only shake her head again. She stared at the door, as if expecting someone to break it down and drag the two of them away. Somewhere in the back of her mind, numbers raced past in an incessant stream. Through the curtains, she could see the faint traces of dawn. At her side, Jessie started to cry again.

Megan paused at the foot of the stairs, the bag of frozen peas still pressed against the side of her face. She was sure she'd heard the scuffle of footsteps.

'Who's there?' she called up. There was no answer. That damned girl – or the Doctor!

She turned back to the kitchen, crossed to a drawer and found the biggest, sharpest knife that she could. Her jaw clenched, she opened the door at the foot of the stairs and began to ascend into the

darkness.

‘Stop right there!’

Ace whirled, her heart pumping as the voice barked out, ringing metallically through the chamber.

Standing in the doorway was a dwarfish-looking man in a light grey suit. His head was completely bald, his features thin and spiteful, skin wrinkly and paper thin. His most disturbing feature, though, was the gun in his hand.

‘You won’t shoot in here,’ Ace bluffed, feeling her voice quaver.

‘And why would that be?’

‘You wouldn’t want to do any more damage to this beautiful ship of yours. I reckon a misplaced shot or two could bring the whole thing crashing down around us.’

‘Perhaps,’ the man considered, his thin, bloodless lips curling into a cruel smile, ‘But it would only take one well-placed shot to bring you down. Now move away from the bench!’

Ace shook her head and reached out for the cylindrical pillar of electronic equipment that stood, winking silently, near the head of the man she’d been about to revive. The pale man’s reaction told her all she needed to know – and now, at least, she knew for certain that it was a spaceship.

‘If you don’t step away from the processor I’ll take a risk with the ship and shoot you.’

She shook her head, emboldened by the fact that he hadn’t shot her... yet. ‘Uh uh. If you were going to do it, you’d have done it by now. You don’t want to risk damaging this.’ She put her hand on the electronic pillar’s chromed dome and wobbled it. The man pulled his lips back from his tiny, white teeth and hissed, catlike. ‘I’m warning you...’

‘Warn all you like, pig-eyes. If you come a step closer, I’ll pull this over. And by the time you manage to shoot me, I’ll have pulled this one over too.’ She stretched out her arm and placed her palm against the column at the head of the next person along

– a woman with wispy grey hair.

‘So we’re at something of an impasse. What do you suggest?’

the man said, moving slowly into the room. His pale eyes darted around, assessing the situation.

‘What I suggest is that you put that gun down.’

He shook his head. ‘Not a wise move. Besides, if you damage that equipment, you’ll be condemning those people to die. Horribly.’

‘Yeah, like you care. I take it you’re Sooal? Is this ship yours?’

‘Yes, my name is Sooal; and, yes, this ship is mine.’

‘One careless owner,’ Ace smirked, trying to act with more bravado than she actually felt. She glanced round the chamber, realising that she was running out of options. Her arms were starting to ache from stretching out. Sooal could just bide his time and then shoot her when she tired. She watched his pink eyes, trying to outstare her.

‘Tell you what,’ she said, dropping her right arm. ‘I’ll do you a swap.’

Sooal cocked his head on one side again.

‘Your gun,’ Ace said, lowering one hand, ‘for this.’

And in an instant, she brought out the torch from her pocket and shone it full in his eyes. with a squeal, he threw his hands up over his face and turned away. Yes! Ace thought exultantly and took her chance. With water splashing around her boots, and the sounds of Sooal grunting and hissing, she sprinted through the chamber’s other exit and disappeared into the darkness.

Megan climbed the stairs slowly, the knife held out in front of her like a charm to ward off evil.

The side of her face still throbbed. Her memory of the incident was still a bit fuzzy: she’d smelled bacon cooking, heard noises in the kitchen, and come down to investigate. As she’d reached the foot of the stairs and peered round, someone had hit her with the pan, and the next thing she knew, she was looking up at Sooal. Someone was going to pay. Ahead of her, in the darkness of the stairwell, she heard footsteps. With a sudden spurt of speed, she bounded upwards, raising the knife.

Silhouetted in the doorway at the top of the stairs was a man. She

lunged forwards as he stepped away from her, into the corridor.

It was Sydney. At the very last moment she pulled back, lowering the knife with a deep and disappointed sigh. ‘What the hell are you doing here Sydney? It’s the middle of the night!’ she ranted. The man turned around, as if he hadn’t known she was there, and stared at the knife in fascination and horror.

‘I heard a noise,’ he said. ‘I heard voices. Downstairs.’

‘Go back to bed Sydney. Now.’ She could barely restrain her anger – and frustration. Sydney gave a pathetic little nod, and Megan fought back an urge to slap him. She watched him shuffle away along the corridor for a few moments, the heels of his slippers flopping on the carpet, and then headed round the corner to the top staircase. There were some painkillers in her room, and boy did she need them.

‘Thank you, Sydney,’ the Doctor said, poking his head out of Sydney’s room as the man reached him.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

The Doctor could see the confusion in his eyes. Sometimes, thought the Doctor, it was easy to forget that the rest of the universe wasn’t constantly running up and down corridors being chased by killer robots or zombies. ‘It’s alright Sydney. You did well. I hate to think what Megan would have done if she’d caught me instead of you.’ He glanced up and down the corridor.

‘She had a knife,’ Sydney said, his hair catching the dim glow of the night-lighting, a snowy halo around his thin face.

‘Now why doesn’t that surprise me? I think you’d better go back to bed, Sydney. Keep out of the way for a while.’

‘What’s going on? Who are you, anyway?’ His eyes narrowed.

‘I’m the Doctor, Sydney – a friend.’

‘Are you here to make us better? Where’s Doctor Menzies?’

‘Probably in bed, Sydney, where you should be. Come on.’

The Doctor helped Sydney into his room, and whilst Sydney tugged his slippers off, the Doctor pulled aside the curtain and peered out into the pearly, grey dawn. A fine mist lay over the lawns, the heads

of the statues along the edge of the loch poking through it like the ruins of some shattered city, peeking out from the surface of the sea. He turned as Sydney put his other slipper on the floor, placing it neatly alongside the first. On the chair by the bed, the Doctor noticed a large, orange scrapbook, its pages thick and crinkled with paste, dog-eared little corners of magazine and newspaper cuttings sticking out at clumsy angles.

Scrawled across the front were the words *Sydney's Book Keep Out*.

A skull and crossbones had been drawn underneath them. He felt an odd chill as Sydney caught him looking at it and draped a towel over it.

'Something very disturbing is going on here, Sydney,' the Doctor said, abstractedly. 'Maybe I'm just imagining it...' He let his voice tail away as he surveyed Sydney's meagre assortment of possessions, lined up with military precision on his dressing table. 'What do you know about a Stacy Chambers? Is she a resident here? Or a member of the staff?'

Sydney shook his head, seemingly forgetting about the Doctor's attention to his scrapbook. 'Hmm... the name sort of rings bells, but I don't think there's anyone here called Stacy. But things have seemed a bit... peculiar around here recently, if you take my meaning. People acting strangely, noises in the night –

that sort of thing. Take Doris next door, for instance,' he gestured to the wall. 'Making weird noises a few hours ago, she was. It's like...' He struggled with his words, clearly frustrated that he couldn't enunciate this thoughts as clearly as he was once able. 'It's like there's something bubbling under the surface, something bad.' He looked up at the Doctor and shrugged. 'I'm probably just tittle-tattling – and I've never been one for that –

but,' he leaned closer and looked round the room, as if scared of being overheard, 'a few of the residents here have been acting a bit funny.' He tapped the side of his head knowingly.

The Doctor fell silent and turned back to the window as Sydney removed his cardigan and turned his attention to his socks. The pale disc of the sun was creeping into the sky, painting the landscape lemon and grey. He glanced at Sydney's bedside dock. 'I think I should leave you in peace. You've been very helpful, Sydney, thank you.'

With a nod, the Doctor slipped out of the room. In the corridor, he

paused outside Doris's door. Silently, he opened it a crack and listened. With a sour feeling in the pit of his stomach, he realised that he couldn't hear Doris breathing, couldn't hear any of those tiny little sounds that people make in their sleep. He pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

She lay sprawled on the bed, arms thrown out at her sides.

Her eyes were wide, dry and dead, her face a portrait of unbelieving horror, preserved in aspic. By the side of her head was a scrunched-up pillow. He gently closed her eyes and examined her fingers, curled up like autumn leaves, stiff and cold. He'd seen death a million times, but there was something more pitiful, more disturbing about this one. No doubt the official verdict would be 'old age', maybe a heart attack. But the look on her face and the pillow by her head, still bearing the indentations of a strong, determined pair of hands, painted another, much darker picture. That someone was capable of such a merciless and calculating act against a defenceless old woman...

Quietly, he rearranged her, made her a little more decorous –

if such a thing was possible. As he positioned her hands on her lap, he noticed something else: a thin trickle of blood running from her left ear. He touched it, wondering what could have caused it. Glancing round the room, puzzled, his eyes alighted on a large, fluffy ball of emerald wool sitting on the dressing table.

Speared through its centre was a lone knitting needle.

Ace knew she hadn't shaken Sooal off – just given herself a breathing space. She pressed herself into a shallow alcove in the corridor wall, flinching as she felt cold water drip down her neck.

Sooal had the advantage that he knew the ship. And that he seemed better able to see in the dark. And, of course, he had a gun. Apart from that, she comforted herself, she held all the cards.

She peered back along the corridor. She'd spent the last ten minutes clambering up and down ladders, doubling back on herself when she realised she was leaving wet footprints all over the place and racing up and down corridors. So no change there, she thought grimly. It began to occur to her that all Sooal needed to do was to sit by the transmat and wait. Of course, she should have gone straight back to the transmat when she'd escaped from the sleeper chamber; but a) she didn't know how to get back there, and b) if Sooal had any sense he'd have turned it off himself.

The thought occurred to her that maybe he'd altered the settings so that the next person to use it would get beamed into space or inside a rock or something. She swallowed dryly.

Away in the distance, huge and echoey, she could hear the sound of footsteps. Checking she still had her torch, Ace moved on into a chamber which – judging from the arrangement of mildewed seats and cracked viewing screen – had been the ship's bridge. One or two of the control panels glimmered faintly: essential systems, lighting, air – that sort of thing – Ace assumed, glancing at them. But was there anything she could use? She scanned the displays again: she could try turning the power off, but that would just plunge the two of them into darkness, and Ace had a pretty good idea who would work best in those conditions.

'Isn't this getting rather tiresome?' came a voice, distant and hollow, the sibilants rattling off the ship's walls, like the hiss of escaping steam. Ace crouched down behind the control panel and peered back along the corridor. A long, dark shadow crawled along the wall towards her. 'Maybe we can come to some arrangement.'

Still crouching, Ace backed towards one of the two exits to the bridge. Maybe this would throw him; maybe he'd take the wrong one.

The corridor was short and ended in a roughly circular room. Two airlock doors were set into the far wall. She spun round, checking the room for other exits – as she heard a high, nasal chuckle from the corridor.

'One dead end,' Sooal whispered, 'for one very dead little girl.'

After Ace had gone back through the transmat, Joyce had bundled Jessie and Connie off to their rooms, not knowing what else to do with them. And then she'd gone straight to her mother's room - only to find it empty. In a slightly befuddled haze, she'd stood outside the room, wondering what to do now: was the spaceship where the treatments took place? Had she missed Mum being taken down there?

She turned sharply as she heard the sound of a door being opened, further down the corridor, and stepped quickly back into her mum's room. Through the crack, she watched a little man in a cream hat pad, cat-like, down the corridor and out of sight. One of the residents, no doubt, off for an early morning constitutional. She waited a few moments and then remembered what the girl, Ace, had said. The Doctor was here. He'd know what to do. Ace had said. they were

booked in at the B&B. With any luck he'd be there now Then they could come back and find Mum. Get this whole mess sorted out. Silently, she slipped back out into the corridor and down the stairs to the front door.

From a window, a pair of impatient eyes watched Joyce leave. As Joyce vanished into the wood, the figure let the curtains drop back against the window. It wanted to leave the room, wanted to go downstairs: it had come here for a purpose, and it itched to get its job done. But it could not afford to be seen – not yet.

There was a time and a place – discovery was inevitable, but there were a few hours still to go before it could begin.

In frustrated silence, it lowered itself gingerly to the bed, a jolt of pain reminding it of the events of the night before. All it could do now was to stay out of sight and wait.

The morning air cleared Joyce's head after the almost suffocating warmth and perfumed air of Graystairs, and as she made her way towards the B&B, she went over and over her memories of her experience aboard the ship in the hope of fixing it clearly in her mind. She knew the Doctor, if she found him, would be able to make sense of it. As she walked up the hill to the B&B she was pleased to see Mary pulling back the downstairs curtains. She waved cheerily at Joyce and went to the door to let her in.

'Mrs Brunner!' she exclaimed. 'Where have you been?

Everyone and their aunt's been asking about you!'

Joyce shucked off her damp coat and Mary hung it on the coat-stand near the radiator.

'It's a long story – and I'm not even sure if I believe half of it myself. There wouldn't be a pot of tea brewing, would there?'

'Of course there would, pet. You go through into the lounge and I'll bring it in. Pop the gas fire on if you like. The central heating hasn't kicked in yet, and it's still a wee bit nippy.'

Mary bustled off to see to the tea, and Joyce sank into the chintzy heaven of the sofa, slipping off her damp shoes and giving her feet a good rub. She closed her eyes, determined not to fall asleep, and was almost immediately subsumed in a torrent of numbers again, flashing past her, streaming away into the darkness. She forced her eyes open

and stared at the mantelpiece clock, relieved to see that she'd only nodded off for a few minutes. Mary was setting the tea tray down on the teak coffee table. As she stood up, Mary's attention was caught by something outside the window, and she crossed to it. Pulling the net curtains aside, she turned to Joyce and beamed at her, 'A bit of a reunion for you, What a start to the day, eh?'

Joyce leaned forward in her seat. Strolling jauntily up the path was a familiar little man in a cream hat, a furled umbrella over his shoulder. Reunion? What on earth was Mary talking about?

Sooal almost laughed aloud. The girl had finally backed herself into a corner. There was silence from the airlock chamber as he crept towards it. He put on his sunglasses – she wasn't going to catch him by surprise like that again. He pressed himself against the corridor wall, 'There's no way out of the chamber. Maybe now you'd like to discuss the terms of your surrender?'

There was no answer. He hoped that she wasn't going to be awkward or put up a fight: he needed to reinstall the processors

– or find replacements. He crouched down and peered into the room. There was no sign of her. Where could she be hiding?

And then he saw a circle of red lights begin to cycle on a display panel on the far wall, and through the triangular viewing hole in.

the airlock door, he saw her. She was waving!

'Two sugars for me, I think,' said the little man brightly. 'It's been one of those nights.'

He removed his hat, placed it on the back of a chair, and sat down.

Joyce stared at him. At the umbrella with the red question-mark handle that leaned against the arm of the chair and the paisley-pattern scarf around his shoulders; at the tightly pursed lips; and at the bright, squirrel-like eyes that now twinkled at her, as if waiting for her to reach some decision. Mary hovered in the doorway, an arched eyebrow and a knowing smile suggesting that she viewed the arrival of both Joyce and the Doctor at such an early hour as more than just a coincidence. No doubt, Joyce thought tiredly and with a hint of irritation as Mary floated off to fetch the tea, it would be halfway round the village by lunchtime.

Had the man seen her watching him through the crack in Mum's

door? Had he followed her here, only to make ludicrous claims about being the Doctor?

'You'll understand my scepticism,' she said a few minutes later as he rooted through the plate of biscuits for the jammy one, 'but am I expected to take your assertion that you're the Doctor on trust?'

He smiled, almost as if he relished the challenge. 'Not at all, not at all. I must admit, I generally don't have much of a problem convincing people of who I am after a regeneration.

The Brigadier is one of the few that has occasionally taken some persuasion.' He smiled again. 'But old Alastair always comes round in the end.' He sipped at his tea, his eyes never leaving hers. She'd heard that the Doctor had changed his appearance in the past, but she'd always assumed he was just a master of disguise, not a shape-shifter. But there was something in this bizarre little man's eyes, something sharp and incisive, puckish and poignant, all at the same time; something that definitely reminded her of the Doctor she knew. As she watched him drink his tea, it was still hard to reconcile him with the man she'd seen only a couple of months ago, storming down the corridors at UNIT HQ, heading for some explosive confrontation with Lethbridge-Stewart. Maybe it was just the lack of sleep; maybe it was whatever that machine had done to her head. But as she drank her own tea, Joyce realised that, somehow, he'd already half convinced her - and without even trying.

'When we last met,' she said thoughtfully, 'we spent an afternoon in Brighton. It rained all day and we had to take shelter. Where did we go?'

The little man thought for a moment. 'When we last met, it was in Cromer, and it was a gorgeous day. Windy, but gorgeous.'

And we walked along the beach, threw pebbles into the sea, and talked about Michael and Terrance; and then you insisted on paying for afternoon tea. If I recall correctly, you told me that you weren't one of my "dolly-bird" assistants, and that you were quite capable of paying your own way, thank you very much.

And I notice you're still using your maiden name.'

He leaned forward and, as if he'd read her mind, said: 'Yes, Joyce. It's definitely me. What do you think of the new, economy-sized Doctor, then?' He scanned himself up and down as if he'd never really looked at himself before.

Joyce gave a sigh and sank back into the upholstered bliss of the sofa. ‘It’s... very *different*. Something of a shock, naturally, but after what I’ve been through in the past few hours, I suppose very little would surprise me.’

‘The open mind of the scientist! Excellent! It’s good to see that UNIT hasn’t worn you down yet, and that you’ve still got all your curiosity. I must admit, I would have been a trifle disappointed if you *hadn’t* been so difficult to convince: a good scientist always goes on the evidence. But the best scientists always trust their intuition.’

‘Rubbish, Doctor!’ Joyce said – and then burst out laughing.

‘Utter, utter rubbish! As usual!’ She smiled warmly at him and reached out to take his hand. ‘It’s good to have you back.’

‘Well, it was your invite that brought me here.’

Joyce shook her head and drew her hand across her forehead, smoothing back her hair, as she was reminded of why the Doctor was there at all. ‘There’s something very wrong going on at Graystairs. Very wrong indeed – I mean, apart from the events of the last few hours.’ She felt her voice cracking at the edges.

‘Your postcard was very cryptic,’ the Doctor said. ‘What was it that made you send it?’

‘At the time, I wasn’t sure whether working for UNIT was just making me suspicious, paranoid.’ She ventured an uncertain smile. ‘I went to see Mum early the other morning – and as I walked up the road through the woods, I had the weirdest feeling that I was being watched. I brushed it off – and then I heard a none, twigs snapping. And through the trees, I could see someone.’ She shook her head at the memory. ‘He looked like an old man, and my first thought was that it was just one of the residents out for a walk. But then I started wondering whether he was, you know, confused.’ She said the word with distaste: she’d never liked euphemisms. ‘Whether he was a resident. I waved to him and he vanished. I thought about just going up to Graystairs and telling them – but then I thought about how I’d have felt if it had been Mum, and some stranger had just left her to wander, so I set off after him, calling.’

‘And did you find him?’

‘He found *me*. Suddenly I turned and he was there, right behind me, with a stick in his hand. I thought he was going to hit me. It’s weird:

I've dealt with all sorts of alien incursions and threats, but I'd never been so scared as I was then, threatened by an old man with a stick.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Human behaviour can be the most alien of all,' he agreed. 'Humans have preconceptions, don't they, about other humans, in a way that they don't about non-humans? And it's the shattering of those that make us see the truly alien in others.'

'There was something in his eyes,' Joyce said nodding. She furrowed her brow. 'Something human – and alien at the same time. I honestly thought I was a goner, and then he started to ramble, muttering about how "they" – whoever "they" were –

had put things in his head. "Bad things" was how he described them, "evil things". At first, I thought he was simply suffering from dementia; I said that I'd take him back – and then he really flipped, threw the stick down and ran off into the wood. I'd never have believed someone of his age could run so fast.'

'What did he look like?' the Doctor asked curiously.

'In his sixties – maybe seventies. Slight build, white hair, grey cardigan. Black trousers. Maybe grey. Not much to go on, is it?'

'Oh, I think it's enough. It sounds like the man I met in the teashop this morning.'

'Really? So he's still at large, is he?'

'It would seem so. Did you find out who he was?'

'Well, this was the thing that convinced me to write to you -

apart from the general atmosphere in the place. When I got to Graystairs, there was a right hoo-ha about someone who'd gone missing. I told that girl – Megan, the odd, gangly one – and she rushed out with a face like thunder. I must admit, I was a bit curious – and concerned. I followed her and saw that she'd gone down the cellar steps. So ...' Joyce smiled, conspiratorially 'You can take the woman out of UNIT... Anyway, I went down half way and heard her telling someone that Eddie had been seen.'

'And did you hear the reply?'

Joyce nodded slowly. 'I heard this creepy, hissy voice say

“Good – we need him. Without him we’ve wasted the last three years.” Something like that. I know the words themselves don’t mean much, but it was the way it was said – so cold, so calculating.’ Joyce felt the hairs on her arms stand out. ‘And something told me I should call someone – and obviously you sprang to mind.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’m glad you did. There’s something very wrong going on at Graystairs, you were right. What happened then?’

‘I stayed for a couple of hours, had a cup of tea, and then Doctor Menzies – one of the doctors up there – came in and said it was time for another treatment session for Mum.’ Joyce narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. ‘He said I should come back tomorrow. I asked if I couldn’t call back in the evening, but he said he thought that Mum would be too tired after the treatment.’

The Doctor leaned forward in his seat. ‘And did he tell you anything about it? About what it involved?’

Joyce’s eyes slipped away from him in embarrassment. ‘I made a few enquiries, but the most I got out of them was that it was “new” and “revolutionary” and involved a new drug regimen that had already been trialled in Europe.’

‘And had it?’

Joyce felt herself flush. She didn’t know. Of course she’d *meant* to check it out; she’d *planned* to do some research into it, call in a few favours in Geneva; she’d even written the details out. But somewhere between thinking of it and doing it, other things had got in the way. Things that were obviously so much more important than subjecting her mother to a new and potentially hazardous course of drugs. Thank you for reminding me, Doctor.

She looked up to see him watching her, understandingly, and almost wanted to slap him. How dare he be understanding?

‘I know how it is,’ he said softly. ‘There’s never enough time, is there?’

She swallowed, her anger draining away as she realised he wasn’t just taking about her. After a few moments’

uncomfortable silence, broken (thankfully) by the sound of Mary sighing exasperatedly over yet another radio report on the Falklands, Joyce moved.

As the Doctor drank his tea she told him all she could remember of the last couple of days, starting with her visit to her mother's room. He listened appreciatively, hmming and nodding throughout, but letting her finish her tale before setting down his cup. Telling it all out loud like that made it sound even more ludicrous than it already seemed – the pale man, being knocked out from behind, the spaceship – as Ace had insisted it was – the transmat and the numbers in her head. So ludicrous, in fact, that if the Doctor had suggested that it had all been a particularly vivid dream, she imagined she would have agreed with him.

'It sounds like the ravings of a madwoman, doesn't it?' she laughed, a slight tremor in her voice. She suddenly remembered the metal nodule at the nape of her neck, and tipped her head forwards to allow him to examine it. As he looked at it he asked her how she was feeling generally.

Joyce gave a shrug. 'I'd feel better if I knew where Mum was at the moment.'

'I'm sure she's fine,' he said, touching the device. The words comforted her more than she expected. This most definitely *was* the Doctor. 'Nevertheless, I need to go back there and find out exactly what that chamber aboard the spaceship is for. How much did you manage to work out while you were wired up?'

She shook her head and scratched her neck, feeling the unwelcome, though not painful, presence of the alien device. 'I got the impression of complex calculations. It was so odd: I felt like I'd been sliced in two – one half performing calculations, the other half just watching.' She gave a little shudder.

'Perhaps some sort of parallel processing array,' he murmured, sitting back on the arm of the chair. 'Using human brains as the processors. I imagine it would be necessary to separate the processing functions from your conscious awareness to prevent you from introducing spurious data into them.' He leaned forward again. 'In your opinion,' he said, 'what was being calculated?'

'Frequencies,' she answered firmly without hesitation.

'Definitely frequencies, harmonics, Fourier transforms. I might have found out more if Ace hadn't woken me up.' She realised that there was an edge to her voice that she hadn't intended.

'I don't think we can blame Ace for that,' the Doctor said. 'I just hope

that she managed to get out without being caught.

'That's another reason I really should be going.' He reached for his hat. 'But before I go,' he said, popping it on his head, 'let me see if I can remove that implant for you. It might give me some clues to the technology and the people behind all this.'

Joyce leaned forward again and pulled her hair out of the way. She felt the Doctor's fingers – surprisingly cool and light in their touch – pressing and probing at the device. With a triumphant 'Aha!', he stood up, and she felt a sudden hot wetness at the back of her neck. The Doctor produced a handkerchief.

'If you don't want to get blood on that smart new jacket of yours,' he said, 'I'd suggest holding this over it firmly for a few minutes.'

Joyce pressed it to her neck as the Doctor showed her the device – much bigger than she'd imagined: an acorn-shaped piece of greenish metal trailing a few inches of hairlike metallic fibres. She gave another shudder, realising that this had been embedded in her, the fibres working their way into her brain.

The Doctor pulled another handkerchief from his pocket, wrapped the device up in it, and put it away inside his jacket. As he did so, he pulled out a sheaf of postcards and envelopes and quickly flicked through them.

'I think this is yours,' he said, handing her the very same card that she'd posted not two days. For a moment, she was about to tell him that it couldn't be; that it was too old, too dry, too yellowed. And then she saw the writing, turned it over and recognised the picture. How could it have aged so much in just a couple of days? She looked up to see him smiling.

'Trust the post office to smudge the postmark so that I couldn't read it,' he said, like a teacher admonishing a pupil for their bad handwriting. 'Next time, don't forget to write the date and time you posted it. You've no idea of the trouble I had to go through to find out when and where you were.'

And with that and a wink he was out of the front door and gone.

She hadn't had much of a choice, Ace thought ruefully as she watched Sooal skulking around the door to the corridor like some pallid elf. Once she'd realised that the airlocks and spacesuits were still functional, and that the external sensors showed the ship was under

forty yards of water and there was a land mass half a mile away, it all clicked into place. She could leave via the airlock, float to the surface, then swim ashore. A bit of a bind, but at least then she could race back to Graystairs, find the Doctor, and wrap this whole thing up.

She checked the seal on the helmet and nudged her rucksack, pushed down into the front of the suit like some fake pregnancy padding, into a more comfortable position. Then she pressed the buttons that would slowly let in water from the outside. As the cold, icy torrent began to foam at her feet, Sooal saw her. She couldn't resist a cheery wave. And as the water swirled around her waist, she took a few deep breaths. This is becoming a habit, she thought. I wonder if I'm now qualified for my 'exiting an alien spaceship underwater' Girl Guide badge...

She was still smiling as she plunged into the darkness and made for the surface.

Chapter Eight

Megan was closing the kitchen windows as Sooal came storming in. His temper was a black cloud, hovering above his head, waiting to spit thunder and lightning.

'She's escaped,' Sooal said. 'That Ace girl's escaped.'

'How?'

'The airlock on the ship. She just put on a suit and out she went.'

Megan gave a half smile. 'Well, we can forget about her for a while, then.'

'No we can't!' he rounded on her and she flinched. 'You know what's out there. What if she finds it – or, worse, damages it?' 'But she doesn't even know it exists. Does she?'

Sooal made impatient clucking noises as he paced the kitchen. 'She managed to use a spacesuit and operate the airlock.'

Who knows what she's capable of? What if she's come from –'

'But they don't even know we're here,' Megan interrupted.

'And if they did, they wouldn't send a girl and an old man, would they?' She watched Sooal silently for a few moments. 'So what are we going to do, then?'

‘We are not going to do anything.’ He jabbed a finger at her.

‘You are going to get a pulse rifle, follow her through the airlock and track her down.’

Apart from his imperious tone, Megan found the idea quite appealing. She’d taken an instant dislike to the smart-arsed girl: getting even with her would be a pleasure. ‘And when I’ve tracked her down...?’

Sooal grinned wickedly, showing his sharp little teeth. ‘What do you think? Kill her, of course.’

Sooal stomped off up the stairs, frustration and anger making his heart pound painfully in his chest. He had to steady himself halfway up, feeling his breath come in sharp, ragged gasps. He fished a silvery device from his pocket, applied it to his wrist, and felt the metabolic stabiliser course icily through his veins.

Not now, he thought, fear tightening its grip on his already weak heart. *Not now*. For a few moments he stood in silence, grasping the handrail as sweat pricked out from every pore. *Not when I’m so close*.

He tried to calm his breathing, felt his heart steady. He knew he didn’t have long; but it had to be – *had to be* – long enough.

Gritting his teeth against the sudden pain in his joints, he heaved himself up the stairs to the attic. He needed to get replacements for the disconnected processors. It occurred to him that the three that had been removed might still be somewhere around –

perhaps even aboard the ship. But it seemed unlikely. He reached the treatment room and pulled down the clipboard from the wall, checking the treatment rota. There were several of the residents who hadn’t been to the ship for a while whom he could

‘call on’: attachment to the processor was a draining experience that, long term, could cause damage. He tried to rotate them –

he didn’t know how long he would need them, and although Graystairs was ideal for his purposes, he didn’t want to exhaust his supply. He’d already used the more dispensable staff. The irony of the whole situation was that he couldn’t risk using the Tulks in the processor array: they were far too valuable.

Sooal jumped at a gentle tap on the door. Menzies stuck his head round, clearly surprised to find him there.

'Is everything OK?' he asked. 'Only there's a treatment-booked for Ceris in twenty minutes. D'you want to be in on it?'

'I have absolute trust in you, doctor,' Sooal answered smoothly. 'In fact you probably know the process better than I do by now –' He broke off as a coughing fit shook his body.

Menzies rushed over and settled him into the chair, despite his protestations. He pulled his stethoscope from his pocket and checked Sooal's heart and chest.

'Fluid accumulation again,' he said, tucking the instrument away. 'Have you taken the stabiliser recently?'

Sooal nodded. 'Just a few minutes ago.'

'You need to rest. Give it a chance to kick in.'

Sooal waved him away. 'I don't have time.'

'Exactly,' said Menzies, peering meaningfully over his glasses. 'The metabolic stabiliser can only hold off the ageing symptoms for so long, you know. Without rest –'

'I know, I know. But if the processor doesn't finish its work soon, I'll be dead anyway.'

Menzies looked away at the mention of the processor. Sooal knew that it was the one thing about his work there that bent Menzies' Hippocratic oath almost to breaking point: he'd assured Menzies that no harm was being done, and that acceptance of it was the price Menzies paid for Sooal's work on Alzheimer's. Menzies had gone along with it with bad grace; but the potential good that the treatment could do was enough to keep him in line.

'You'd better go and give Ceris her sedative. Steve will help you.' 'Where's Megan?'

Sooal tried hard to suppress a smile – and didn't entirely succeed. 'She has... other duties to attend to. Now go on: I need to work out replacements for the array.'

Reluctantly, Menzies left him – with another warning not to exert himself for a while. Sooal checked the treatment sheets. He didn't know how much time he had left: the array had to be his first priority

'I'm here to see Doctor Menzies,' said the perky little man at the front door.

Bernard looked him up and down, wondering if he was a new patient, just arrived. He didn't have any luggage with him, and they were usually accompanied by some hugely embarrassed son or daughter, or a tearful spouse, keen to impress on the staff that their dearly beloved wasn't really going round the bend, but just needed some 'convalescence'. But the man was alone, his only luggage a rather ugly umbrella. There was something frighteningly intense in the man's eyes – and at the same time, something else, frustratingly vague. If he wasn't a patient, Bernard thought, he ought to be. He waved the man in, checked that there were no relatives tugging suitcases out of a car outside, and closed the door.

'What did you say your name was?'

'I didn't. But it's Smith. John Smith.'

'And is Doctor Menzies expecting you?'

'I doubt it – but I'm sure he'll be interested to speak to me.'

The little man leaned forwards and peered into the dining room where the tables were being set up for breakfast.

'I'll go and see, but it's a bit early. He may not be up yet.'

'I can wait.'

Bernard shrugged and gestured across the hallway to the lounge. Mr Smith nodded and strolled through whilst Bernard went upstairs to find Doctor Menzies.

No sooner had Bernard gone around the corner at the top of the stairs than the Doctor poked his head around the lounge doorway. Checking the coast was dear, he headed for the steps to the cellar.

The laboratory was still and quiet. A faint hint of bacon hung in the air. Joyce had said the transmat portal was somewhere in the middle of the kitchen. He looked down at the pristine white tiles on the floor, hoping to find some indication of its location, some marker. He knelt down and soon spotted a faint scratch in the tiles. Experimentally, he waved his umbrella around in the air above it, but nothing happened.

'Control panel, control panel,' he muttered to himself as he stood up

and looked around the room. It had to be here somewhere. With a gleeful smile, he spotted the Bakelite light switches and scampered over to them. The switches themselves seemed fixed, unworking. But to his delight he discovered the whole block was hinged at the side, and swung away from the wall to reveal a flat-panel display, lights winking merrily. He tapped at it and it answered him with a beep. Closing it, he crossed back to the scratch and stuck out his umbrella. The end of it disappeared. He moved it backwards and forwards a few times and then stepped through.

The Doctor pulled a face at the state of the ship as he materialised in the corridor. Water ran in dribbles down the walls, and slimy skeins of algae reflected back the overhead lights, eerily green. Rivulets of rust trailed from leaking bolts, and the sounds of the ship's hull, creaking and groaning, reminded him of a medieval torture chamber.

'I wonder if Mary needs a part-time cleaning job,' he thought. As he strolled through the deserted ship, remembering Joyce's vague directions, it was easy to imagine it being haunted

– dark, ungainly shadows were everywhere, and the omnipresent sounds of the vessel hinted that the ship's crew still strolled the corridors, incorporeal and angry. As he headed for the sleeper chamber he stopped to look over the few control panels that still showed any life, hoping for some clue as to the purpose of this whole set-up. But all he could gather was that it had been there about three years, was running on emergency batteries, and would never be capable of leaving the Earth's atmosphere again.

He soon reached the chamber. Other than the ten or so people on the couches it was deserted. Their total stillness was unsettling.

For a few minutes, he wandered from person to person, checking their pulse rates, their pupillary reflexes, their breathing. They all seemed well enough, although in a highly stimulated mental state, despite their almost comatose appearances. Then he turned his attention to the equipment to which they were wired, tracing the cables from the chromed cylinders to a large, rectangular metal box under one of the beds.

At his touch, a panel slid aside in the top, revealing controls and more displays. Curiouser and curioser, he thought.

He stood up, tapping his chin with the handle of his umbrella. It was dear that someone was using the processing power of the human

brains in the chamber. Joyce had been sure that they'd been performing calculations related to frequency.

The only thing now, the Doctor thought, was to find out exactly what those calculations were. He fished in his pocket for the implant he'd removed from Joyce's neck and sat down on one of the vacant couches.

Megan buckled up her black leather tunic with fierce determination, tucked the static pistol into her belt and slung the pulse rifle over her shoulder. It had been a long time since she'd dressed like this, used the rifle; shooting squirrels with an air-rifle just wasn't the same. She gave it a once-over to make sure it was in perfect working order, tied back her dirty blonde hair and checked herself in the bedroom mirror. The business, she thought, just the business: apart, obviously, from the purple and yellow of the bruising on her face, and the fact that she couldn't hold one eye open properly. But she'd do, she smiled to herself, thinking how shocked the residents would be if they could see her – slack, loopy old Megan, armed to the teeth. She knocked back another painkiller.

Since she and Sooal had arrived, she'd had precious little chance to exercise her combat skills: dragging the residents in from the garden for tea, listening to their interminable stories of how 'it wasn't like this in my day' and wiping shitty arses had blunted her edge, she was sure. She'd grown soft and sloppy.

She'd never have been caught out in the kitchen if her reflexes hadn't been dulled by three years of ministering to Graystairs'

residents. She had to keep reminding herself that she and Sooal had come here for a reason.

Megan slipped into the corridor and down the stairs to the kitchen, treading cat-light, pausing as she heard Harry and George heading down for breakfast. She smiled cruelly to herself: George was going to get one hell of a shock now that Harry's treatment was complete, but it would be his turn soon enough. As they passed, she headed on into the kitchen. She went to activate the transmat but found to her surprise that it was already active. Perhaps Sooal was aboard the ship, sorting out the mess with the processors. With a last look around, she stepped through.

Behind Megan in the kitchen, the storecupboard door swung open silently, just a crack. A pair of eyes peered out.

It was time to move.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

As the darkness closed in on the Doctor, he could feel the fine metal tendrils of the implant worming their way into his spine and up through the base of his brain. He hadn't thought that they might be confused by the alien wiring and structure of his brain, but he could sense that they were baffled, not finding the medulla, the pons, all the structures that they used as signposts to guide their way. A jolt of pain stabbed down his spine as they touched nerves that they never expected to encounter, analysing the signals they were picking up and moving on. Searching.

Around him, billowing up out of the past, out of the centuries of memories stored in his head, he suddenly saw Leela's face, named with a fur-trimmed hood. Thick flurries of snow sleeted across his vision as the smell of scotch came to him. Then it all vanished in a soundless *pop*. The blind, mindless fingers of the alien device continued to probe his brain, unaware of the memories they were stimulating.

With a sudden flare of pink light, and with blinding clarity, he saw a fragment of a face peering out at him from a broken window – a single grey eye. The window shimmered orange and brown and yellow, a flurry of autumn leaves that swirled out and away from him. He smelled the woody tang of bonfire smoke, felt it curling around him like a coat. And although he could still only see that lone, baleful eye, somehow he knew that the mouth attached to it was moving; and he could hear a rich, sardonic voice whispering to him, asking him if he'd forgotten him already...

In a flash of utter darkness, it was suddenly gone, leaving him with a strange taste in his mouth, wondering whether the whole thing had just been an artefact of the silent, probing silver worms, still working their way through the damp, alien soil of his brain. He wanted to leap up, rip the wires from his head.

But it was only then he realised that, unfortunately, his brain hadn't been so alien that the filaments hadn't been able to disable his voluntary nervous system. He hadn't expected that.

He'd assumed that the sleepers were simply drugged to keep them in place. It was a mistake, he knew, that could well cost him his life, since he was now totally vulnerable.

He pushed thoughts of the eye and the leaves aside and turned his senses outwards as the intruders in his head drew closer to their goal. Although he couldn't open his eyes, he could hear, he could smell and he could touch. The sour odour of rust and mildew filled his nostrils, laced with the tang of ozone and rank, stagnant water. The ship seemed more alive than ever, a soundscape of dripping water, shifting metal plates and footsteps. Footsteps?

He felt his hearts speed up.

He wasn't alone.

In his pocket, Sooal's datapad began to bleep frantically. He'd picked out three of the residents as replacements for the missing processors and was about to find Steve or Menzies to have them taken down to the ship. Puzzled, he pulled out the datapad and stared at the display with growing incredulity: the activity of the array had shot up by eighty percent.

Got you! Megan laughed to herself as she saw the diminutive figure of the Doctor on the couch. Sooal must have beaten her to it.

His face was beaded with sweat, his dark, straggly hair plastered to his forehead. She noticed the hat, set jauntily atop the interface column. Her eyes ran over the displays set into its shiny surface and gave an appreciative chuckle. The probes were having difficulty, it seemed, in locating the Doctor's frontal cortex. Some of the readings didn't make any sense. Maybe this interface was damaged – perhaps Ace had wrecked it when she'd rescued the other three processors. Sweet irony!

The instruments indicated quite clearly that the Doctor was only half an hour away from a total neural collapse. Gleefully whistling, she set off for the airlocks. One down, one to go.

The suit had been designed for use in the vacuum of space, where the air in it would balloon it out – not for the depths of the sea where the water pressure would smooth it across her body like a second skin, icy cold and claustrophobic. Pockets of trapped air formed bubbles, clustering around Ace's stomach and her rucksack, rising into the rigid helmet. As she rose swiftly through the dark waters, watching the dim lights of the ship recede below her, she tried to recall what little she knew about

'the bends': nitrogen bubbles accumulating in the blood vessels and joints as the sudden drop in pressure brought it out of solution in her

blood. She felt her lungs swelling rapidly with the breath she didn't realise she was holding. Remembering something she'd heard about diving, she breathed out steadily with a low 'Aahhhh', swallowing every few seconds as she felt the pressure building up rapidly and painfully in her ears. The thought that, as she rose, nitrogen bubbles in her veins could be conspiring to kill her chilled her more than the coldness of the water around her. She couldn't remember all the symptoms of the bends, but she knew they were painful. She started breathing in and out rapidly as the world around her began to brighten, recalling that her rapid ascent through the last few dozen metres to the surface was probably the most dangerous.

Ace broke the surface with a shock of bright relief, taking in huge lungfuls of air as if she'd been deprived of it on the journey up from the ship. As droplets streamed down the faceplate, she began treading water, trying to orientate herself. She rotated around as best she could, looking for the land that she knew was there. As her arms started to tire and the suit restrained her movements, she began to panic. Having escaped from Sooal, was it only to drown, out here in sight of land?

She wondered if she should try to get out of the suit, but remembered how complicated it had been to put on: trying to take it off in the water would be even harder. The air in it offered her some buoyancy, but it wasn't enough to prevent her sinking every time she stopped treading water. It gave her an idea, and she fiddled with the air controls. A faint hiss reached her ears as the suit slowly swelled out around her. Gently, her legs swung out from beneath her until they lay flat on the waves, her face looking up at the vacant bowl of the sky, grey and dreary.

Great, she thought as she turned her head inside the helmet.

I might not drown, but there's a good chance I'll die of boredom.

John watched Alexander turn his find over in his hands, feeling strangely proprietorial about it. He took a last drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out in the saucer he was using as an ashtray.

'So we do nothing, then?' Alexander said. 'We just carry on with the survey as if nothing has happened, as if you hadn't found that?'

'Stop being such a drama queen,' John said, setting it down on the table. 'We've got another two weeks out here. Let's just get on, get it out of the way, and then we can sort this thing out.'

If you want to use the tent radio to tell someone about it, then fine. But I can't see them sending out a rescue party.'

He reached for his cigarettes again. Alexander raised a disapproving eyebrow. 'You've only just put one out.'

John ignored him and lit up again, pointedly/ 'And how, exactly, do you suggest we finish the survey? Moby's knackered, the compass won't stop spinning, and every other electronic instrument we have has died on us. We can't do much of a survey without any equipment, can we?'

'What's to survey? As far as we can tell, the only things left around here are barnacles and seaweed. Just write that down, add a few charts and you're done.'

John sighed. 'That's easy for you to say – it's not your PhD we're talking about, is it?'

'Hey, don't get at me.' Alexander raised his hands defensively
'I didn't have to come and help.'

John snorted, blowing out a bluish cloud of smoke. 'Yeah, and a great help you've been so far.'

'Thanks a lot, John. If I hadn't come – and remember it was Mother's idea, not mine – you'd have had to find someone else, and if I recall correctly, they weren't exactly jumping at the chance of accompanying you back at uni, were they?'

John looked away, staring at the metal lump on the table. He suddenly wanted to chuck it back in the sea: it – and that dome-thing – had well and truly screwed up this trip. Two weeks it should have taken. Two weeks of taking fish samples, checking the quality of the water and working out whether sunken German ships were polluting the sea, and they should have been on their way back to write it all up. And what had they got?

Sweet FA.

Alexander fanned the smoke away from his face and stood up. 'I'm going up on deck for some fresh air,' he said, glowering at John.

His brother watched him go. 'Don't fall over the handrail,'

he called after him sourly.

‘There’s something out there!’ Alexander shouted down the steps just seconds after he’d gone on deck.

‘What?’

Alexander didn’t answer. John could hear him clattering about above, running along the deck. With a throaty roar, the engine started up, sputtering and coughing. The metal object rattled on the tabletop, vibrating its way steadily towards the edge: John grabbed it and placed it on a seat cushion before racing upstairs to find out what the hell was going on. He could hear the sound of the anchor winch reeling in the chain that had held the boat steady for the past few days.

As John emerged from below deck, Alexander pointed out to sea. He put the boat into gear and it began to chug forward, oily smoke billowing grumpily around the engine housing. Away in the distance, floating on the sea, was a glinting shape, reflecting back the sky like a crumpled chocolate wrapper. It took him a few seconds to realise that it was moving and that it was a person in a shiny suit.

‘Bloody hell! There’s someone out there!’ said John, sheltering his eyes from the sun.

‘Well done Sherlock. Find the lifebelt and get ready to throw it when we get close enough.’

Weird suit, thought John as they drew close enough. It looked like a space-age Michelin man. For an uncomfortable second, he wondered what they’d do if the suit contained a corpse. He remembered, as a child, finding a dead cat, tied up in a bin bag and thrown onto some waste ground near where they’d lived. He’d ripped open the bag, and the stench had made him throw up on the spot. If there was any suspicion that this suit contained anything other than a live, breathing human being, then he certainly wasn’t going to be the one to open it up.

He needn’t have worried: as they pulled up alongside, the new arrival made a sudden rocking motion, trying to flip itself over. John threw the life preserver overboard and watched the blimp unfasten the seal around the spacesuit-like helmet. With a hiss and a froth of bubbles, it came loose, and suit began to deflate.

‘Grab the ring!’ shouted Alexander over his shoulder.

After a few seconds of floundering, the newcomer looped its arms through it and John began hauling on the rope, dragging the – by now – quite diminutive figure towards the boat.

‘Careful of the handrail,’ Alexander warned. ‘It’s been giving off electric shocks all week.’

John threw him a wary glance as their guest climbed the ladder on the side of the boat, removing the helmet.

Whatever John had expected, it certainly wasn’t the young woman that stood before them.

The Doctor didn’t move – couldn’t move. He lay, listening to the sound of Megan’s footsteps departing, her whistling slowly fading away. What was she doing? What *had* she done?

Inside his brain, the living silver wires had found their goal, and with another intense flash, the darkness into which he’d been abruptly plunged flared into aching white light. He felt his mental faculties splitting, as his visual field darkened down again, now only illuminated by the streams and rivers of numbers which Joyce had described. One half of his mind could only observe – a mute, impotent presence; the other half, out of his control, joined with the minds of the others present in the room, and started absorbing the flows of data. The Doctor found it hard not to be fascinated by the whole process, the ingenuity that had gone into this parallel processor: harnessing the computational power of a dozen human minds and using it to...

well, he expected that he’d come to that soon enough. But it was certainly an achievement.

Another spike of pain lanced along his spine and his sense of touch vanished as if a switch had been thrown. Perhaps his body shuddered, or spasmed. Perhaps he’d rolled off the couch and was now lying in a pool of rancid water on the floor. His sense of balance seemed unaffected, but how could he be certain? He was totally cut off from his body, the ultimate in sensory deprivation. Pragmatically, he realised there was nothing he could do about that now, and turned his attention to working out what this colossal processing power was being used for.

Joyce had been right about the frequency analyses being performed: someone had huge amounts of data to wade through and, from what he could judge, the processing was far from complete. He realised, to

his delight, that although he couldn't alter the raw data, he could influence what he saw, which equations presented themselves to him, and the efficiency of some of the algorithms. As if flicking through the pages of a book, the Doctor scanned the information, watching streams of numbers, huge matrices of values, frequencies and timings, rotate around him as if he were the centre of their universe.

Suddenly the image shuddered as if someone had thumped the side of a television set. He winced as the figures began to flicker in and out of sight, overlapping, dissolving into each other. And deep inside his brain, he felt sharp electrical crackles and imagined he could smell ozone. Something was wrong. He felt his hearts speeding up, losing their asynchrony, starting to beat dangerously in time with each other.

Surely it wasn't all going to end like this, wired up to a computer, powerless. No gloating megalomaniac, no invading army of alien lizards spitting fire at him. Just silence and disconnection, like someone pulling a plug.

He was going to die.

Chapter Nine

Ace unfastened the suit and slipped out of it, letting it pool around her feet, a sloughed silver skin. Her rucksack tumbled onto the deck and she scratched her scalp, itchy from the confinement of the helmet, breathed the fresh, salty air and felt droplets of spray on her face.

'Ace,' she said, seeing as no one else seemed to want to break the silence, and stuck out her hand. The curly-haired one shook it grimly. The other one held back but gave her a cautious smile. She winced, feeling a tiny stabbing pain in her elbow. For a moment, she remembered the bends, nitrogen bubbles, and took a few deep breaths, hoping that it was the right thing to do.

She reckoned they were probably brothers - there was a similarity about the eyes, the set of the mouth. They both had dark hair - one short, one longer and curlier; and the short-haired one had a neatly-trimmed moustache. In their early twenties, she expected.

'I'm John,' said Curly. 'And this is Alexander, my brother.'

'Nice to meet you both - oh, and thanks for the rescue. I was beginning to wonder how long I'd be floating around out there. Good job I don't get sea-sick easily. Any chance of a cuppa and something to eat. I'm starving!'

'Yeah, sure, said John, clearly trying not to be too thrown by her sudden appearance from the sea. 'Come on downstairs and we'll get you something.'

And before either of them could start on the questions that Ace knew must be on the tips of their tongues, she picked up her rucksack and the suit and headed down the stairs. Despite its ratty, peeling exterior, the inside of the boat was surprisingly cosy, if a little cluttered. Above the padded seats running round the dining area – which Ace assumed doubled as beds – were wide, high-edged shelves packed with bits of electrical equipment, charts and all sorts of sailing paraphernalia. High up in the walls were tiny windows which let light in from above. She plonked herself down and smiled at Alexander who sat down opposite her. She could hear John in the galley, rattling pots and pans and cutlery. Her mouthful of bacon butty seemed weeks ago; she wondered if sudden, ravenous hunger was a symptom of decompression sickness.

'What were you doing out there?' asked Alexander. 'I mean, we're miles from nowhere and suddenly there's an inflatable woman in the water.'

'No wonder you hauled me aboard so quickly then,' she smiled.

He rolled his eyes.

Where should she begin? She looked at Alexander, trying to weigh up whether he was the no-nonsense sort who would just laugh at the idea of aliens and spaceship and transmats; or whether he was at least open-minded enough to consider them as possibilities. She wished that the Doctor was here so that he could sidestep all the usual introductions in his usual handwavey way. But he wasn't, and she didn't think that cryptically saying

'I'll explain later' would get her very far.

'This is going to sound weird, and you're probably not going to believe me, but I've just come out of a spaceship that's down on the seabed.'

'Oh right,' Alexander said slowly with a cautious nod. A spaceship. On the bottom of the sea: He paused and his eyes drifted down to the seat by his side where, Ace noticed for the first time, something big and, well, *alien*-looking lay. 'Would this

“spaceship” – (she could hear the quote marks in his voice) ‘– be a big domed thing?’

Ace noticed John, standing at her elbow, three mugs crammed into his hands and the room suddenly felt very small, very claustrophobic.

‘I’m not sure that’s how I’d describe it. But you’ve seen it?’

Ace asked John.

‘I did a dive down to it the other day,’ said John, setting the mugs on the table.

‘Did you manage to get inside it?’

‘Couldn’t find a way in,’ John said, almost conversationally, as he returned with a fat, brown teapot.

‘Well, I was lucky. I managed to find a way out.’

The homely sound of pouring tea was the only noise for a few moments. Then John gave a tired little laugh and rubbed his eyes. ‘So this is on the level, then?’

‘What?’

‘This thing, down on the seabed. It’s some sort of crashed Apollo thing, is it? And you’re what? The pilot? Are there any other crewmen – women – down there, then?’

Ace gave a sigh. She should have known that it was too good to be true. She reached out and picked up the object from the seat, a rough doughnut of grey metal with a sphere set in the cavity. She picked it up and saw John’s hand move out, as if to stop her. ‘Did you bring this up?’ she asked. The brothers’ eyes told her she’d guessed right. ‘Just look at it. Does it look like it was made on this planet? The ship is nothing to do with NASA

– it’s an *alien* spaceship.’

‘Who knows what sort of stuff NASA are dreaming up?’

John answered airily.

‘Whatever it is,’ Ace said, ‘it’s nothing like this. Look, if you don’t want

to believe me, then fine. But don't expect me to come up with another story just to make you happy. That thing down there isn't from Earth. Believe me – I've seen enough of them to know.'

She set the object back down on the table and looked from one brother to the other.

'Tell you what,' John said. 'Maybe I've got a better explanation.'

'And what would that be?'

'It wouldn't have anything to do with the German wrecks, would it?'

'Eh? What wrecks?'

'The German shipwrecks,' John repeated. 'In the Scapa Flow - from the Second World War.'

Ace shook her head blankly. What was he talking about?

'So what happened?' John sneered, obviously warming to the fact that he thought he'd got it all worked out now 'You and your treasure-hunting mates panicked, did you? You were ransacking the ships and something went wrong? You shot up to the surface leaving them down there?'

'Look,' Ace said, shaking her head, losing patience. 'I haven't got a clue what you're on about mate. If you want to think that I've just come up from some sunken German ship, then fine.'

But if you'd just put your brain into gear for a sec, you'd be asking yourself about this thing-' she jabbed her finger towards the object that John had brought up, '-and about this suit.' She reached down and picked up the flimsy silver suit, dripping water onto her jeans. 'And if you think that what you saw down there was some wrecked battleship, you must need your eyes testing.'

John grabbed his mug from the table and stood up. 'You're a right little Miss Know-it-all, aren't you?' he spat, and stormed off up the stairs.

Ace pulled an 'Oh God, what have I said?' face at Alexander, who shrugged back at her. They sat in silence for a few moments as Ace turned the metal device over and over in her hands. This must be some sort of record: she hadn't been out of the water for five minutes

and already she was making enemies – and without a Doctor in sight.

Joyce lay on her bed, desperately tired yet unable to sleep. Every time she dosed her eyes, the numbers came creeping back, sneaking into her head. And when she opened them again, she could see a whisper of them, dancing around the periphery of her vision, as if her brain couldn't switch off properly. And Mum. What about Mum? A twinge of guilt grew in her chest as she realised that she really ought to be back at Graystairs, looking for her. But she'd tried that, and look what good it had done her – she'd ended up on a spaceship, wired up to a computer with her head full of alien nonsense. And the Doctor.

How could he have changed so much in only a couple of months? Shrunk from a tall, dashing man with unruly white hair and a rather dapper – as much as she could judge these things –

sense of style, to a little, Scottish man with unruly dark hair and a rather silly umbrella? Was she being strung along? Was whatever happened to her messing up her mind, distorting her judgement?

She swung her legs onto the floor and buried her head in her hands, almost wishing she could cry about some of this – any of it. If nothing else, whatever Mum was going through should be upsetting her, yet she hadn't shed a single tear since she'd watched her sleeping. When was that? Yesterday? The day before?

She heaved herself to her feet and crossed to the dressing table mirror. She'd never looked so tired, so pale. So ugly.

She looked down at the photograph of herself, Terrance and Michael. And suddenly she felt desperately sad that Mum wasn't in the picture too. A scrap of paper was folded up against the frame. Opening it, she read the Doctor's note: *From one member of the family to another. The Doctor.*

She had a sudden vision of how they'd once played cards, a long, long time ago, sitting up late at night and drinking cocoa in the Doctor's laboratory.

Happy Families.

Noise of broken-white and hammerings on the inside-long tunnel with blue-how many of us are there in here-long tunnel-wetandwetandwetand-closing down essential-fire burning-closed of just us now-is this how it ends-goodbye-goodbye-oh-who are you-sorry, I couldn't help it-my head-my arms-my-I can feel it but I don't know-cough, taste of blood, my blood, this

isn't right, oh no my boy, this real y isn't right Chesterton. Comfy leather Chesterton. I really must sit down for a while, get my breath back. Thank you, thank you my dear. Yes, Just a few minutes and-and then we can return to the... blue, blue. Not the tunnel. No it's blue. It tastes blue, I'm sure of it. Can't you taste it? Warm blue. Pass me the... yes, that. What is it Tegan? I can hear it, silver noise, turn it down, turn it down! Just a nip, there, that's better.

All deep now. Sort them out, make them behave.

No, no, sit down for a while. On here, on this, this... yes. Thank you my dear, thank you.

The Doctor's body shook and spasmed, waves of muscle contraction travelling down his entire length. One arm flopped loosely at his side, fingers almost touching the stagnant water that pooled on the floor.

The figure that had entered the chamber paused, surveying the berserkly flickering displays on the instrumentation column above his head. Then, limping painfully but moving as quickly as it could, it crossed to him and reached under his head to where the strands of the implant had buried themselves in his neck.

The stranger knew that there must be a better way to remove them - but there wasn't time.

With a short, sharp jerk, the fibres were severed. The Doctor shuddered once more and lay still – breathing, alive, but still.

‘So how did this spaceship get there?’ asked Alexander. ‘And why?’

Ace shrugged. ‘We’ve not worked that one out yet.’

‘We?’

‘Me and the Doctor – a mate of mine.’

‘And is he down in the ship as well?’

‘No, he’s back at a nursing home – no, not *in* a nursing home.’ She caught sight of his expression. ‘We’re looking for a friend of ours who’s vanished. I must have gone through some sort of matter transmitter and found myself on board the ship. I got chased by some creepy little man called Sooal and managed to get out of the ship’s airlock.’ She spread her hands wide. ‘And here I am.’

‘So where’s this nursing home? On one of the islands?’

‘Dunno – is Dumfries on one of the islands?’

‘Um, not quite – here, look at the map. He unfolded a map as Ace moved the teapot and mugs aside, and spread it out on the table. Within seconds, the truth was horribly dear: Graystairs and the Doctor were nearly three hundred miles away in the southwest of Scotland, whilst she and the two brothers were on board a small boat, moored near a tiny island off the far north-east coast. Oh good one, Ace. She took a huge gulp of her tea.

‘So how long will it take me to get back to Dumfries?’

Alexander grinned awkwardly. ‘Well, let’s see. The post and supply boat calls round every fortnight – so the next one should be calling, oh, Friday I reckon. As long as the weather holds.’

‘But it’s only Sunday! Couldn’t you just drop me off? Not all the way to Dumfries, obviously,’ Ace added, mentally picturing the shape of Scotland and realising that the boat would have to go all the way around the top to get to Dumfries. ‘Just on the mainland where I can get a train or something?’

‘I don’t think John would be too happy about that – we’re up here doing a survey for John’s doctorate. Marine life in the area - or the lack of it.’

Ace’s shoulders slumped. Stranded, hundreds of miles away from where all the action was, in the middle of nowhere on a crappy old boat with two nerds looking for fish. Great.

She caught sight of the spacesuit, crumpled like a shiny rag in the corner of the room.

‘Well it looks like there’s only one thing to do. I’m gonna have to dive back down to the ship and get back in through the airlock.’

‘You an expert diver, then?’

‘Well I managed to get up OK.’

‘Going down’s a bit more complicated – especially if you’ve never done it before – even if John lets you use his equipment.

Which he won’t. Anyway,’ Alexander said, ‘John couldn’t find a way

into it – you got a key or something? From what he said, it was just a big, mirrored dome – no entrances, airlocks. Nothing.’

Ace remembered the brief flash she’d had of the ship exterior as she’d rocketed from the airlock: it looked, as far as she could recall, like any old battered spaceship – metal plates, a few tiny lights, bumps and sticky-out-bits all over.

‘Are we talking about the same thing?’ she asked, getting yet another Bad Feeling. ‘This dome of yours doesn’t sound like the ship.’

Alexander rummaged about on the shelves and pulled out another crumpled map, folded the wrong way into an unwieldy bundle. It was a larger scale map than the first one. Alexander pointed at what looked like a whopping great island labelled

‘Kelsay’ – but from the scale at the edge of the map, Ace could see it was only a few miles across.

‘We’re here, he said. ‘And this is where the ship is.’ He indicated a biroed cross, half a mile or so away.

‘So we’re not directly over it, then?’

Alexander shook his head. ‘How long had you been making for the shore?’

‘I hadn’t. I came up from the ship and just floated about for about fifteen minutes before you guys came over and rescued me.’ Alexander rubbed his chin. ‘The mystery deepens,’ he said and raised his eyebrows. ‘Unless you’ve been pulled about by some weird, freak currents, we’ve got a puzzle. Whatever this ship is that you came out of, it’s not the same thing that John found.’ He looked up at her with a frown. ‘It looks like there’s more than one mystery down there.’

The treatment room always filled Sydney with a cold, sick feeling. He didn’t know why – it was the treatment room, so it was where he was going to be made better. So that must be good, mustn’t it? He wasn’t quite sure what was wrong with him, but he’d been told that his memory wasn’t what it was. And when he thought about it – when he wasn’t busy with his scissors and glue and scrapbook – he knew in a vague and detached way that they were right. But wasn’t everyone like that?

Hadn’t *he* always been like that?

He couldn't remember.

The pills that Doctor Menzies had given him were starting to take effect, and he felt his arms and legs grow fuzzy and distant as if he were a puppet, someone else pulling his strings, but he managed to clasp his scrapbook possessively to his chest.

Bernard and Claudette led him down the corridor, opened the door to the treatment room, and guided him in. Although he couldn't remember what lay behind the simple, white door it triggered ghostly memories as it opened, an uncomfortable *déjà vu*. The room was dark, the only illumination coming from a reddish spotlight in the ceiling mounted above a reclining chair.

Sydney suddenly saw images of people – men, women, children even – one after another, strapped into the chair, wrists and ankles bound with leather straps. And they were screaming, screaming...

He hesitated, tried to pull back, but Bernard and Claudette had him in a firm grip.

‘Come on, Sid,’ said Claudette. ‘You’ve done this before.

You know the routine.’

He stared at her, and had a sudden, sickening urge to see *her* in the chair howling as the instruments descended on her pretty, dark features. Cutting, gouging.

But if he’d been here before, then it must be alright, mustn’t it? A word jumped into his head: *Tulk*. A word full of anger and power and fear. His mouth was dry as, unsteadily, he lowered himself into the chair, feeling its damp, plastic sweatiness. He put his hands on the armrests – and was almost surprised when metal clamps didn’t spring out to trap them. He couldn’t feel any sensation in his legs.

‘The doctor will be along in a minute, Sid,’ Claudette said gently, following Bernard out of the room. He heard the key turn in the lock.

Yes, thought Sydney muzzily. The doctor will be along in a minute. And then everything will be alright. As his whole world shrank down to that cone of soft, bloody light, his scrapbook tumbled to the floor, flopping open. His last memory was of its centre pages, plastered with the bland, smiling faces of catalogue models and magazine celebrities, pasted roughly onto mismatched bodies, jumbled arms and legs. Scrawls of thick, red crayon coiled around them, staining the junctures

of heads and necks, limbs and torsos, and filling up the empty eye holes from which the victims in Sydney's head screamed out at him.

Up on the deck, Ace leaned against the railing – almost forgetting what they'd said about electric shocks. But the handrail must have been in a good mood. The pale sun was climbing in the morning sky, bleeding its light through layers of thin, grey cloud. The sea glittered, spread out around the boat, and in the distance she could see the brown smudge of the island. How could she have been so dumb as to assume that the spaceship would be close to Graystairs? That was the whole purpose of transmats – to send things over long distances. The only problem now was how was she going to get back? She'd been the one that had pestered the Doctor for some adventure, and just as she was getting into the thick of it, here she was –

unceremoniously dumped at sea. Ace heard footsteps beside her.

Alexander stood there, hands deep in his jacket pockets, apologetic and shy.

'Don't worry about John,' he said. 'I think he's a bit scared of you.'

'Thanks,' Ace said heavily.

'Not like that. It's just that John's PhD dissertation has been well and truly screwed up by that thing – those things – down there. And now here you are, all fresh-faced and breezy, telling him you've come from an alien spaceship. He likes to be in control; he feels it's all running away from him.'

'Can't he just write "There's a bloody great alien dome and a spaceship and they're scaring the fish away."? Anyway, if it's his dissertation, what are you here for?"

Alexander gave a grunt. 'Mother's idea. "It'll be a nice break, Alexander. It'll b good for the two of you to spend some time together, Alexander. Give your brother a hand, Alexander. This is really important to him, Alexander".'

'And it's not so important to you, eh?'

He shrugged. 'I don't mind, really. It's not as if I've got much else to do.'

They heard the angry sound of pots clattering into the tiny sink down below, the rush of water, the clomping of feet.

'I take it John's the golden boy, then.'

Alexander nodded. 'He's the hard worker, the grade-A student. He's the one that's going to make everyone proud. I've always been the lazy one, the feckless one. The one who "could do better" – but didn't.' Ace heard the slight tremor in his voice and suddenly wanted to hug him.

'Parents, eh?' she said. 'Can't live with 'em, can't murder 'em with a hatchet and bury their bodies in the garden.'

'You get on with yours, then?'

'Not so's you'd notice. Didn't see much of Dad – and saw too much of Mum.'

'Maybe you were lucky.'

'Maybe...'

Alexander grinned suddenly. 'How d'you fancy a trip over to the island – we've got a little camp over there, spare radio, that sort of thing. It'd make a change, give John a bit of space. Fancy it?' Ace nodded. 'Lead the way, Cap'n!'

. .are we going then-oh yes, yes, I suppose we-ouch no-can't you turn it down.

Black sounds, black, black sounds. Sarah is that you? And all those coloured smells, small and bright like pinpricks. I know this, I know it.

Thank you. Do I know you? I... it's like a, what do they call it, a kaleidoscope. I recognise all the parts, all the fragments... but (pain again, pain again) they won't come together, won't make sense.

Splashing like a couple of kids at the seaside, Ace and Alexander dragged the orange dinghy ashore on the island. This was more fun than the holidays she'd had when she was young, despite the wind and cold. Once the dinghy was far enough up the beach not to be dragged back out to sea, they set off for the camp. The island was much bigger than it had looked on the map – a gently sloping green and brown rock, edged with pebbly beaches and a couple of low cliffs. The wind whipped Ace's hair around her face and she could smell that seaside smell – seaweed and a hint of ozone.

'So how long have you been here?' she asked as they walked up the

shingle beach towards the camp.

‘Seems like a lifetime,’ Alexander grinned. ‘About two weeks.

We brought a van up to Thurso with all John’s gear, and took the ferry to the Mainland – that’s the biggest of the Orkneys. We hired the boat off some money-grabbing local fisherman and sailed up here. And since then, I’ve stood around watching John doing whatever it is that he does.’

‘Sounds like fun. A bit like me and the Doctor, really.’

‘You mentioned him before. Friend – or your shrink?’

‘Friend – although sometimes I reckon *he* could do with a shrink.’ Ace’s thoughts suddenly turned to the Doctor, wondering what he was doing now.

‘So ... he’s your boyfriend?’

She laughed and gave him a playful shove in the back.

‘Not likely – he’s... a hundred, if he’s a day. He’s a mate. He needs me around to look out for him, stop him from getting into trouble.’

‘Right,’ he said dubiously. ‘Just remind me: who’s the one that’s castaway on an island three hundred miles from where she wants to be with no way to get back?’

Ace pulled a face. ‘I’ll think of something. Trust me.’

In the darkness of a small room at the top of the house, Sooal addressed eleven people. They sat in irritated, fidgety silence.

‘A little more patience,’ he said, looking round the assembled figures, ‘and then we will be ready. Only two more.’

‘Why is it taking so long?’ demanded one man in harsh, imperious tones.

‘These things can’t be rushed.’

‘We have waited too long, Sooal. I have no desire to wait longer.’

‘Sooal is doing his best,’ interjected a woman’s voice, commanding but less impatient than the man’s. ‘We should be grateful that he has brought us so far. We can wait a little longer.’

One of the others made a growling noise; there was the sound of cracking knuckles, like a pistol shot in the dark. ‘Why are we toadying around this colourless goblin?’ asked the man.

‘Why do we need him at all?’

‘Because we aren’t yet complete,’ the woman reminded him.

‘We were fine before –’

‘Things have changed,’ interjected one of the other men. ‘We need to be cautious and careful. If we attract undue attention, everything Sooal has achieved could be undone.’

They fell into a glowering silence. Sooal looked round the room, sensing that he had the majority of them on his side.

Good. They knew that they needed him. It galled him that he needed them just as much – at least for now. In his pocket, his datapad suddenly bleeped: he repressed a snarl – they didn’t know about the ship, about the processors. And it had to stay that way. He excused himself and left the room. Outside, he leaned against the wall and pulled out his datapad. Damn!

Another processor had been disconnected. What was going on –

and where was Megan? Hadn’t she killed the girl yet?

Ace was disappointed at the camp. She’d expected something bigger, something a bit more *Lawrence of Arabia*: big tents with awnings, tables with charts and maps. Maybe a couple of camels.

Instead, there was a raggy-looking orange tent and awning, the blackened remains of a small fire and a pile of cooking utensils, battered and in need of a good clean.

‘Not much to look at, is it?’ said Alexander, reading her thoughts. He unzipped the tent, ducked inside and came back out with a half empty bottle of whisky and two tin mugs.

‘Now that’s more like it!’ she said.

The two of them hunkered down on the grass as Alexander poured out a couple of generous measures. She gazed around, realising how starkly appealing the, island was. Apart from the ever-present wind roaring in her ears, it was so peaceful, so...

untainted. Graystairs and the spaceship seemed a hundred miles away.

'Hi,' she heard Alexander say suddenly, and turned to see an elderly couple coming round the side of the camp. Plodding at their feet was a rather old and tired-looking black terrier. It sniffed at the corner of the tent, and Ace half expected it to cock its leg.

'Hello,' said the woman in a sharp, precise voice, wind blowing at her mussed-up brown hair. She wore a surprisingly new-looking green jacket; a thick tweed skirt and ultra-sensible brown walking boots. Her face, like that of her husband, was flabby and pale; and her accent was softly Scottish, with a strange, musical lilt to it. There was something vaguely familiar about them, Ace thought, but maybe it was just that they were a typical middle-aged tweedy couple. They looked miserable and uninterested, surveying the campsite almost disdainfully before looking back at Alexander.

'We were walking around the island,' the woman said, turning her head sharply to stare at Ace. 'And an enquiry as to the progress of your survey seemed appropriate.'

Alexander pulled a face and shrugged. 'A few technical problems, he said lamely. 'Should be sorted soon.'

Ace watched the couple. They were definitely odd – their eyes didn't quite match their facial movements or their words.

And their speech patterns were strangely clipped and precise, yet clumsy. As if they'd learned English from a bad school textbook.

As she stared at them, the man caught her gaze and smiled – but just a moment later than he should have done, like he hadn't quite grasped what smiling was all about, and had to make a deliberate effort. The dog came snuffling around her and she reached out to stroke its head. It pulled away and stared at her and its big, bizarrely blue eyes held on hers far longer than felt natural. Ace took another swig from her cup and watched the couple staring out to sea. It was as if they'd suddenly stopped finding Alexander and her interesting. Or important.

'Nothing has been discovered out there, then? Nothing unusual,' the man said abruptly, switching his gaze back to Alexandra

'Oh, just a –'

'– a few fish,' Ace cut in sharply with an overly cheery smile.

‘You know the sort of thing – a couple of sharks, dolphins. The usual. We saw two, er, what are they called Alexander? A couple of sea horses, riding around on the waves.’

Alexander looked at her as if she’d gone mad. *Just go with me on this.* Ace thought. *Just go with me, Alexander.*

Alexander smiled at the couple and nodded, although he looked more like he wanted to ask for help in escaping from the madwoman at his side.

‘Fine, fine,’ the woman said, taking a deep breath. ‘Your friend does not appear familiar to us. Is her arrival recent?’ She stared at Ace, her eyes cold and piercing.

‘Problems with my boat,’ Ace said hurriedly. ‘It sank.’

‘No doubt you will recover.’

Ace nodded, trying not to catch Alexander’s eye. The dog had rejoined its owners, standing like a sooty sentinel between them. It looked from her to Alexander and back again.

‘We should continue our walk,’ the woman said suddenly, rubbing the palms of her hands together, as if she had something unpleasant on them. ‘Good luck.’

‘Thanks,’ Alexander said, and the two of them sat in silence as the couple walked away up the slope towards the crest of the island.

As soon as they were out of hearing, Alexander turned to Ace. ‘What the hell was all that? Sharks, dolphins? *Sea horses?*’

‘I know, I know. Total cobblers.’

‘I’ll say!’

‘Yeah, but the weird thing was their reaction, didn’t you think? They’ve lived on this island for God knows how long, they must know a bit about the sea. But they didn’t react at all.’

‘Maybe they were just humouring you.’

‘Yeah, yeah, course they were. Didn’t you see their expressions – not an ounce of surprise or humour between them. And that’s not the weirdest thing.’ Ace could suddenly picture the couple – and their dog – in a totally different setting.

‘You say they’ve been here since you arrived? And they’ve not been away at all?’

Alexander shook his head. ‘Not unless they’ve got a secret submarine hiding on the other side of the... hang on, you’re not telling me that they’ve come through that transmat thing as well, are you?’

‘I don’t know about that. But if they haven’t, someone ought to tell them that they’ve got identical twins in Muirbridge. With the same weird speech patterns, too. And an identical dog.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Back in Muirbridge, there was a tweedy couple, identical to them, in the village. We bumped into them once or twice. I thought those two looked vaguely familiar, but it was only when they spoke that it clicked where I’d seen them before. So how are they getting between here and there unless it’s with a transmat?’

Alexander grinned. ‘I can see where this one’s going. You want to take a walk over to their cottage, find the transmat and use it to get back.’

‘Bright lad! You’ll go a long way!’ She held out her mug, the remains of the whisky still sloshing about in it. ‘Another pint, please, barman!’

‘This is mad,’ panted Alexander half an hour later, as he crawled through the grass on his stomach, rocks digging into him. He couldn’t believe he’d let Ace talk him into this stupid expedition.

From here, lying face down at the crest of the hill, they could see the tweedies’ tatty-looking cottage, at the foot of the opposing slope. There was no sign of its occupants. Overhead, seagulls wheeled and dived and headed out to sea, screaming at them, their cries disturbingly like those of babies. He shuffled into place at Ace’s side and rolled over onto his back, staring up at the thin, scudding clouds, feeling the gentle warmth of the spring sun on his face.

‘If there is a transmat in that cottage, he said thoughtfully.

‘Can I come with you?’

‘What would Big Brother say?’

‘Sod him,’ Alexander laughed. ‘And anyway, I’m Big Brother.

He’s a year younger than me.’

‘You’re planning on leaving your little brother behind and making a break for freedom?’

‘Yeah,’ he said after what seemed like a decent enough pause. ‘Maybe I am.’

‘Boy are you going to be in for it when Mummy finds out!’

He turned to her, stung by her humour more than he would have expected. He opened his mouth to ask her how she’d managed to get away from her family when she suddenly pushed his head down into the coarse grass.

‘Ow!’

‘Ssh.. I can see them.’

He struggled out from under Ace’s grip and peered over the hillock behind which they’d concealed themselves. Squinting, he could see what Ace had seen: the two tweedies were leaving their cottage, walking down and away from them towards the sea, a few hundred yards from them. Circling around them, a fluffy satellite, was the little Scottie dog.

‘Right, Ace whispered. ‘We’re off.’

‘Shouldn’t we wait ‘til they’re further away – like round the other side of the island?’

‘You nance! Come on!’

The cottage looked rotted, decayed: holes gaped in the slated roof and weeds sprouted from the crumbling gutters and downpipes. The windows reminded Ace of the holographic shopfront in London – all dust and flies and cobwebs. Tatty blankets served as curtains, draped clumsily and haphazardly behind the smeared glass. She vaulted over the low wall at the back of the cottage, Alexander close behind her.

‘Shouldn’t one of us keep a look out for Zorg and Zeta?’ he said.
‘Who?’

‘Them two – well, they’re probably aliens, aren’t they?’

‘I hope so,’ Ace grinned. ‘But *Zorg and Zeta?* What TV programmes have you been watching? Can you see ‘em from here?’

Alexander scuffled across the unkempt garden, snagging his jeans in a tangle of weeds, and poked his head around the side of the building.

‘We’re fine. They’re miles away.’

‘Good! Keep watching them just in case.’ Ace made her way to the window.

Despite its appearance, the flaking dark green paint and rotting woodwork, the window was securely shut. She stepped back and looked the cottage over: it was a single storey building, so no conveniently open upstairs window. The other one on the ground floor – the kitchen from what she could see through the oily, smeared glass – was firm, but Ace noticed that the putty holding the glass in was crumbling along the bottom edge. She scratched at it with her fingers.

Alexander pressed a chunky penknife into her hand.

‘Nice,’ Ace said admiringly. Now this was what she called a penknife. As she set to work on the window, she made a mental note of what she wanted for Christmas from the Doctor. No doubt he’d add a few things to it: a laser and an alien lifeform detector would be good. Ten minutes later, she’d cleared enough of the putty away to be able to get her fingernails under the edge of the glass, and she began alternately pulling and pushing it, loosening it. Alexander watched, occasionally nipping back to the corner of the cottage to check that the tweedies were still away.

With a gritty crack, the window split in two, one half shattering noisily on the flagstones at their feet. Carefully – and, she realised, a bit pointlessly – she laid the other piece of the window down on the ground. Alexander gave her a leg up onto the window sill, and from there she squeezed in. Balancing awkwardly on her hands on the stone sink, she wriggled her legs through and caught sight of Alexander’s grinning face on the other side of the glass.

‘You’d better get the door open,’ he laughed. ‘If you think I’m coming through that way, you’ve got another think coming.’

Ace jumped down onto the floor, wrinkling her nose at the smell – like a combination of rotting meat and vegetables mixed with sweat and urine. For a moment, she hesitated, wondering if she really wanted to see what lay in the rest of the cottage.

Cautiously, in case there was some sort of alarm, she stepped over to the living-room door. A manky curtain had been nailed over it. She

pulled it aside, felt her stomach heave at the stench, and had to back away. She leaned on the sink, breathing deeply through her mouth. Alexander had gone – presumably round to the front door. She needed to get it open in case the tweedies were on their way back and saw him. Taking a deep breath, she held her nose and raced into the lounge.

The room was dark, the air thick with the stink that had crawled into the kitchen. Catching her feet on the furniture, she crossed to the front door. And as she reached for the handle, the door opened inwards, and she stumbled backwards.

‘It wasn’t even locked,’ Alexander said breezily, standing in the doorway.

‘Typical.’ Ace stuck her head out, sucking in huge lungfuls of fresh air.

‘God!’ she heard Alexander exclaim in disgust. ‘What’s that stink? And what’s that?’

She looked where he was pointing – a wide, coffin-shaped box with rounded edges and corners lay against the wall. It was translucent and pale grey, and in the dim light of the room, Ace could see lights twinkling on its side.

‘Is it the transmat?’ breathed Alexander softly

‘If it is, it’s not like the one I used this morning.’

Leaving the door ajar now that her eyes were acclimatizing to the darkness, Ace crossed to the coffin and knelt down next to it, almost too scared to open the lid for fear of what it might contain. The smell was stronger, and she noticed an oily, yellowish residue around the seal where the lid met the main body of it.

‘Open it,’ hissed Alexander.

‘Hang on, hang on. We don’t know what it is. It could be a bomb, or have some sort of alarm attached to it.’

‘You didn’t say that when you were breaking the window.’

Ace gripped the smooth handle, moulded into the front edge of the lid and gave an experimental tug. The lights on the panel changed the pattern of their flashing and with a sucking, dunking noise, the lid lifted like she was opening a chest freezer down at Iceland – or

Iceworld, come to that.

‘Oh...’ she said, backing away and letting the lid fall with a thump. ‘That’s where the smell...’ She pushed Alexander out of the way as she rushed into the front garden and emptied the contents of her stomach all over the weeds.

‘Not the transmat, then?’ Alexander said as she wiped her mouth on a scrappy bit of tissue paper she found in her jacket pocket.

‘*Not* the transmat. I dunno what that thing’s for, but it’s all caked with slime; and it doesn’t half stink!’ Breathing deeply, she stood at the door, gazing into the fusty gloom. ‘Right, we’d better try the other room.’

It was just as dark, but smelled a little less, A large, thin mattress lay in one corner. What drew Ace was a table along the adjoining wall, on which lay an assortment of electronic equipment. She swept the beam of her torch over it, picked up a couple of the smaller pieces and turned them over in her hands: their unfamiliar curves, colours and textures spoke dearly of their alien origin, and Ace felt a sense of satisfaction that her suspicions had been confirmed. It was a shame, she thought, that she didn’t have a due what any of the devices did. Oh for a handy Doctor to work out their functions just from the shape of the bobbles on the top.

‘Oh-oh!’ She heard Alexander’s low warning. ‘Tweedie alert!’

Bugger, thought Ace, taking a last look around the room. All this, and no transmat. She wondered, briefly, where the toilet was - and then remembered the coffin in the other room. It didn’t bear thinking about.

‘Come on!’ Alexander hissed. She saw him hovering in the doorway, and he beckoned to her. Sticking her head out into the welcome fresh air, she saw the tiny, distant figures of the tweedies, coming round the headland.

‘Crouch down,’ she said, ‘and get round the back of the cottage. Go on.’

He followed her instructions, and she dosed the door behind her. There was nothing she could do about the broken window; so she hoped that the tweedies either wouldn’t notice it, or wouldn’t think that she and Alexander were any kind of a threat to them. She had visions of the two old folk hunting them down in the middle of the

night and dragging them back to the cottage to lock them in the coffin thing. Where, Ace thought with a growing sick feeling, they'd probably die choking on their own vomit.

Once behind the cottage, they clambered over the wall and sprinted back up the slope. They were still out of line-of-sight of the tweedies, but Ace didn't stop looking back until they were over the ridge and lying, panting, on the grass, Hansel and Gretel escaping from the witch's cottage.

'You do realise,' Alexander said between gasps, 'that if they realise we've been in there and seen all that stuff, that we're dead.'

'What can two old fogies do to us?'

'Two *alien* old fogies,' Alexander reminded her. 'Two alien old fogies with a dog and ray guns.'

Chapter Ten

The world was a series of reflections in shattered mirrors.

Fragments, curiously unnamed but still identifiable, surrounded the Doctor as his rescuer pulled him along. His sense of time had been disrupted by whatever had happened to him, he knew that. But although he could remember individual elements of the past few hours (or were they days... or even minutes?) he couldn't put them all together. Like bits of old soap, they'd cling together in his hands for a moment and then fall distressingly apart again. He felt he ought to be much more worried about this fragmentation, but his sense of concern was as disconnected from him as the world seemed. It was as if every aspect of himself now belonged to someone else, and he was viewing them all at a distance, unable to bring them together, unable to reconstitute what, he assumed, was the real *him*.

He heard a sound, knew that it had meaning even though he couldn't work out what it was. It seemed to speak to something inside him, and he let himself be guided by it. They were moving now... *that* way. His surroundings were mysterious, dark and full of meaningless shapes and colours, tastes and smells and textures, all mingled up in a whirling, synaesthetic samba; but he trusted the other person to know where they were going. The world rushed past, a shredded tapestry of remembered things, hastily re-patched in his head as he went. Perhaps that was the wrong approach; his conscious mind was clearly not working properly. He should switch off his conscious censor, stop trying to analyse everything, trying to *actively* make sense of the

world.

He tried to relax, and let himself be guided by whoever it was at his side.

‘Do you do this sort of thing everyday?’ panted Alexander as they flopped down outside the tent. He examined the empty whisky bottle disconsolately and remembered that there was another on the boat.

Ace grinned. ‘I reckon the tweedies will be back at the cottage and will have discovered the broken window by now, so if they’re going to come after us, it probably won’t take long.’

‘D’you reckon they will? Come after us, I mean?’

‘Well, they’ll know we’ve been in the cottage and discovered their dark, stinky secret – even if we don’t have a clue what that dark, stinky secret means. If you were them, what would you do?’

Alexander considered. The thought of being hunted down by two elderly people in wellingtons with an asthmatic dog seemed vaguely ludicrous. But then he thought about the slimy coffin in the cottage, and suddenly it didn’t seem so ludicrous after all.

Ace suddenly sprang to her feet. ‘The radio! You said you had another radio in the tent – let’s see if we can call for help.’

‘Like who?’

‘I dunno – police, coastguard... anyone we can get through to.’

Alexander pulled the tent flap aside, and Ace followed him in. A couple of mattresses with scrunched up sleeping bags lay at one side; at the back was the radio. Ace squatted down beside Alexander whilst he flicked switches and turned dials.

‘Come on, come on,’ Ace harried him.

Something was wrong. The ‘on’ light was stubbornly steadfastly refusing to live up to its name. He slid the radio forwards - the back was a tangled bird’s nest of torn wires and ripped-out components.

‘This is trashed,’ he said softly, his voice despondent and dead. ‘There’s no way we’ll get this working in a month of Sundays. With both radios gone, we’re cut off.’ He looked up at Ace, bleakly ‘We’re really on our own now.’

Michael hesitated for a moment before ringing the bell. He kicked his feet on the welcome mat as he heard footsteps inside.

Through the frosted glass of the door panels, he could see someone coming towards him, silhouetted in the light from the other end of the hallway.

'Hello,' he said, as a cheery, middle-aged woman opened the door, wiping her hands on her blue apron. 'Is Doctor Brunner in?'

'Well, well,' she said, beckoning him in, beaming beatifully.

'Someone is popular today! Come on in, you're letting all the heat out.'

He smiled awkwardly and stepped into the hallway, the smells of cooking and furniture polish wafting over him. In the distance, he could hear the radio.

'Have a seat in there,' she said, gesturing towards the lounge.

'I'll see if she's in.'

She vanished up the stairs, humming brightly to herself.

Michael stepped into the lounge, but didn't sit down. A knot of twisting nerves was forming in the pit of his stomach. Overhead, he could hear footsteps, doors opening and closing. And then more footsteps, descending the stairs.

His mother stepped into the room, and for a moment he had the impression of someone scared of what she might find there.

And then suddenly she was wrapping her arms around him, holding onto him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. He hugged her back, burying his face in her shoulder, breathing in the familiar, comforting smell of home. After what seemed like ages, she stepped back. She looked tired and drawn. He perched on the edge of an armchair as she sank onto the sofa and reached out and clasped his hand. Tears were struggling to form in the corners of her eyes.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'I came to find you. And Gran.'

'There was no need, everything's fine.'

But Michael could see that her smile was forced, her jaw tight.

‘Are you on leave, then?’ she asked. ‘Your father didn’t say anything. I sent you a letter. Maybe it missed you.’

He gave a shrug, realising how dry his mouth was, and tried to remember how his speech was supposed to start; but she didn’t give him a chance.

‘It’s lovely to see you, Michael. Gran will be so pleased. She keeps talking about you. I think she feels a bit embarrassed about being here, you know. But Doctor Menzies says she’s responding to the treatment, which is good, isn’t it? I don’t know how long –’

‘Mum, listen –’

‘– she’ll be here, but it probably won’t be long. And then I thought she could come and stay with your father and me for a while. Just ‘til she gets back on her feet. Maureen’s been marvellous about looking after Gran’s place – she told me she doesn’t know why Gran needs a cleaner, the place is so spotless.’

‘Mum, I’ve got something to tell you –’

‘Let’s see if Mrs Christmas will rustle us up a cup of tea. You look like you could do with one. Aren’t they feeding you properly? I know what UNIT catering’s like, but it’s not –’

‘Mum!’ He squeezed her hand tightly – too tightly, he realised, as he saw her wince. ‘I’ve got something to tell you.’

‘Sorry.’ She looked shocked – almost offended that he’d interrupted her so forcibly, started a tiny crack in her shell. ‘Go on, what is it?’

‘I’m not here on leave,’ he said slowly. ‘I’ve gone AWOL.’

She frowned as if he were speaking a foreign language. ‘I don’t understand. What d’you mean?’

‘Absent without leave, Mum. I’ve run away.’

She stared at him blankly, and he felt her hand go very slightly limp in his, felt her withdraw from him. ‘But you were really happy there. What’s changed?’

He took a deep breath, scrabbling about in his head again for the speech he’d been working on, but his mouth was running ahead of his

thoughts. ‘Nothing’s changed, Mum. It’s just not working out.’

‘But you were so happy,’ she repeated, like a mantra that would make everything true and bright and whole.

‘No, Mum. No I wasn’t.’

‘When did this start? Are you sure about this? You can’t just run away – they’ll court-martial you. Your father. .’

‘It’s nothing to do with Dad. This is down to me.’

This time she pulled her hand away completely ‘But he’ll be heartbroken, Michael. You know how much it meant to him that you got into UNIT.’

‘I know, Mum. That’s what makes it so hard.’

‘Have you told your father yet? Does he know about this?’

Michael shook his head; the scene was playing out just as he’d feared it would. ‘No, Mum, he doesn’t know. Nobody knows. That’s the whole point. I’ve had enough of UNIT. I want out.’

Ace and Alexander spent a frantic few minutes trying to get the radio to work, but finally had to concede defeat.

‘What now?’ Alexander asked.

‘I dunno. The tweedies might be happy that were cut off. If they were going to do anything to us, they’d probably already have done it, not just wrecked the radio.’

Alexander got to his feet. ‘We should go and tell John what’s happened.’

Ace nodded. ‘You take the dinghy and tell him. I’m going to keep an eye on the tweedies. At least if they come for us, we’ll get a bit of advance notice.’

‘You sure? Wouldn’t you be better coming to the boat with me?’
‘Maybe, but I think I’d rather know exactly where they are.’

For all we know, they’ve got a boat of their own, or they can swim like fish or something.’ She looked around the camp. ‘If there’s anything you think you might need, take it now – just in case you don’t get a chance later. Keep an eye on the beach – I’ll wave or flash

my torch at you when the coast's clear.' She patted her pocket.

Alexander started stuffing bits and pieces into a large holdall from the tent. He picked the broken radio up, too. 'John might be able to fix it,' he said by way of an explanation. Ace nodded, although she wasn't hopeful. The two of them walked down to the shore, arms laden with radio equipment, maps and other assorted bits and pieces which Ace helped Alexander load into the dinghy before they pushed it out. He jumped aboard. 'Are you sure you don't want to come with me?' he asked.

'I'm not sure John would appreciate me going back there -

especially if the tweedies are after me. They didn't wreck your radio 'til I arrived, and it's not fair for me to put the two of you in danger.'

'Don't be daft,' Alexander protested. He realised the dinghy was starting to drift free. 'And how do you know they won't come after us anyway?'

She shrugged cheerfully.

'You're a nutter,' he shouted, shaking his head as the dinghy float away from the shore.

'Maybe I just like to live dangerously.' Ace splashed back up the beach.

'Like I said,' she heard him shout above the wind and the rush of the waves, '- nutter.'

Back at the camp, Ace rooted through the tent and the bits and pieces Alexander had left behind, looking for anything that would be useful in fighting off the tweedies – if they came for her. Which, she assumed, they would. Sooner or later. They hadn't seemed particularly threatening – the worst that could happen would probably be that the dog would snuffle her to death. But the fact that they'd felt the need to sabotage the radio suggested that they considered Alexander, John and herself as potential threats. And if the destruction of their only means of communication with the outside world didn't satisfy them, what might they try next?

She didn't like to think about it – although she took some small comfort from what was in her rucksack.

Her rucksack! There was no sign of her rucksack: she suddenly

pictured it, under the dining table on board the boat.

Oh well, she sighed. Just as long as John and Alexander didn't try to use her 'deodorant': if they mishandled her cans of nitro-9, sweating would be the least of their problems. She took a deep breath and carried on picking through the brothers' stuff.

The last thing she expected, just as she was rolling up the sleeping bags, was to feel the cold metal of a gun barrel against the back of her neck.

Chapter Eleven

'Well, well,' said Megan. 'What a small world this is.'

Ace started to straighten up, the sharp tip of Megan's gun still pressed into her neck.

'Careful,' Megan warned, her voice oozing smugness. 'It would be so tragic if this were to go off in my hand.'

Ace raised her arms slowly and felt Megan remove the gun from her neck, heard her step away. She turned around slowly and saw Megan standing a few paces from her, dressed head-to-toe in black leather. At her feet was a crumpled spacesuit.

'A bit overdressed for swimming, aren't you?'

'A bit underdressed for surviving a shot from this, aren't you?' Megan countered. The side of her face was swollen and bruised, her left eye hardly open at all.

'What happened to you? Looks like you had a fight with a rolling pin and lost.'

'A pan, actually, as you know full well.'

Ace frowned.

'Oh don't play the innocent,' Megan said. 'I heard you creeping down the stairs. And if it wasn't you, it was your friend the Doctor. But he's not going to be bugging me any more.'

'Why? What've you done to him?'

'I wish I could take the credit, but I'm afraid that will have to go to Sooal.'

'I said what have you done, bog-brain?' Ace could feel her face flush with anger.

Megan theatrically looked at her watch. 'Well, I'd say round about now, his brain will be a smouldering lump of charcoal.'

'Steady...' Megan raised her pistol again as Ace took a step towards her. 'On my way through the ship, I saw him wired up to the computer. It looked like he was having a bit of a bad trip.'

She grinned cruelly.

'And you just left him?'

'Well,' Megan considered, archly, 'it was either rescue him or kill you. Decisions, decisions.'

'You cow.'

Megan smiled coldly and gave a sigh. 'As last words go, it's not very memorable, is it?'

'Maybe not. But as – Alexander, grab her!'

Megan whirled, only to discover no one there. And as she turned back to Ace, the camping kettle smacked her across the side of her face. The bruised side. With a howl she dropped the gun and clapped her hands to her head. Ace glanced at the pistol, lying at Megan's feet and hesitated for a moment. But if Megan saw her going for it, she'd forget about her face pretty damn quickly. Instead, she turned and began to sprint up the hill towards the ridge.

Joyce and Michael stood, shivering slightly in the cool evening air, waiting for someone to answer the door. She could hear noises, anxious voices inside, and through the frosted glass she saw vague movements.

'This is ridiculous,' Michael said, trying the door handle. It was locked. He stepped back outside the porch and looked up at the windows. 'Wait here while I try round the back.'

Before Joyce could argue, Michael had stomped off around the side of the building. As she waited anxiously for someone to answer the door, her thoughts returned to what she was going to do about Michael. She'd have to tell Terrance, of course. And he'd be angry. Disappointed, too, she supposed. But angry mainly. If Michael hadn't

wanted to stay in UNIT, why couldn't he have said something to her; talked it through with her, before deciding to leave, to run away. More than anything, she supposed, Terrance would be angry that Michael had done it this way. Suddenly, she heard the rattling of bolts and locks. The door was jerked open by a young black girl. Claudette, wasn't it? She looked flustered, confused to see her.

'I've come to see my mother,' Joyce said, perhaps a little more primly than she intended, and stepped into the hallway before waiting to be invited. Claudette moved hurriedly aside.

'Er, yeah. Fine. Could you wait in the -'

'No, I could not.'

And with that, she pushed past the dumbfounded Claudette and stormed up the stairs like an angry tornado, almost colliding with an elderly man coming out of his room. She didn't even bother to apologise as she swept on along the corridor in the direction of her mother's room. The door was ajar, and for one, cold moment, Joyce expected to find her mother gone again. But she was there, sitting up in bed reading a copy of *Woman's Realm*, with the cover model mysteriously cut out. She looked up as Joyce came in.

'Come on, Mum,' Joyce said, crossing straight to the dressing table and hunting round for her mother's toilet bag. 'We're getting you out of here.'

'You most certainly are not!' she replied indignantly.

Joyce whirled round. 'Mum, don't start, please. Just get out of bed and get dressed.'

'Mum? What are you talking about? Who are you? What are you doing in my room? Get out!'

'Mum,' she implored, crossing to her side and trying to take her hands. Why did this have to happen now, just when she needed her to be OK, to be normal? Norma pulled her hands away, drawing back from Joyce with a horrified look on her face.

She reached for the buzzer at the side of the bed. Joyce tried to stop her, but she was stronger than she'd expected and managed to stab at it a couple of times, shrieking and wailing for Joyce to get off her.

Oh God, thought Joyce, suddenly feeling close to tears -but closer,

much closer, to slapping her. With a sudden burst of terrifying, irrational anger, she wanted to grab the old woman's shoulders and shake her and shake her and shake her...

She stared at her mother, a thin, frightened woman in a blue bedjacket, something cruel and mocking behind those eyes. She turned away from her and in one huge, extravagant movement swept everything off the dressing table onto the floor with a crash and a shattering of glass and china.

'Alf! Alf!' Norma was shouting, jabbing at the buzzer.

'Alf's dead, Mum. He's dead!' she rounded on her.

'That's an evil, wicked thing to say,' she replied, her eyes glistening, a tiny tear of saliva on her lip. 'You're a hateful, hateful girl. D'you know that?'

'Just shut up, just shut up!' Joyce spoke through gritted teeth, clenching her fists – so hard that, only later, did she see the tiny, bruised crescents on her palms.

'Don't you speak to me like that. You were always a nasty girl. If your father could hear what you're saying, saying that he's dead –'

'But he is, Mum. He's been dead for ten years. He died of cancer, remember? He shouldn't have died, but he's gone. He shouldn't have left me to cope with you, he shouldn't have been the one that died –'

Joyce froze and the world shuddered to a sickening halt around her as the words left her lips. She'd said the one thing that she promised herself she'd never say. She didn't believe it; she knew she didn't mean it. But it was said. All she could do was to stare at the pathetic figure in the bed in front of her, all feeling gone. Her mother just gazed at her. Joyce tried to look away, tears streaming down her face, blurring her mother's features, turning her into something indistinct, unknowable. She couldn't bear to look at her, scared of what she'd see in her eyes.

She just wanted to run away, to leave this mad little woman and her mad little world; to get back to science and UNIT and normality and how everything used to be.

But instead, in silence, she sat on the edge of the bed and held her mother as tightly as she could.

Ace's original impression of Kelsay as an unspoiled, picturesque island was quickly being replaced by an impression of it as a deserted, tiny rock with nowhere to hide. As she'd reached the ridge, she'd looked back to see Megan following her – weaving from side to side as she held her free hand over her face.

Occasionally she loosed off a shot from the pistol in Ace's direction, but with one eye covered she was dearly having difficulties.

Nevertheless, the crackling fizz of the pistol's shots, and the grass and soil that spurted up from the ground didn't do much for Ace's confidence. Throwing herself down on the grass over the ridge, she looked down the slope where, in the distance, she could see the tweedies' cottage.

Great, she thought. Four of us on the island and I've managed to piss off three of them. Nice one, Ace.

In the other direction, towards the north-east, the ground became more convoluted. If she was to find anywhere to hide, to shake Megan off until she could make it back to the beach and attract the boys' attention, it would be there. Her chest heaving, she scrambled to her feet and set off. To her relief, it seemed that Megan was making slower progress than she was: she kept glancing back and managed to duck behind a rocky outcrop at the bottom of the slope before Megan came over the ridge. Ace watched her stand and survey the island below her, rotating mechanically and slowly from side to side.

Oh no, Ace thought. Please say she isn't a killer cyborg.

She watched as Megan slowly started down the slope –

heading in the direction of the cottage. If she told the tweedies that she was hunting Ace down, it wouldn't be long before the three of them managed to corner her.

So having spent the last ten minutes running away from Megan, Ace realised, ironically, that her best chance was to take on Megan on her own and then deal with the tweedies. She stood up and leaped across a narrow gorge between the rock and a grassy bank a few feet away. Glancing up, she saw that Megan had seen her and was altering her course – as Ace had hoped.

That's it, she thought, scrambling along the bank towards where it sloped down to another patch of rocks. Come to Ace.

The rocks were rough, but thick with lichen and moss, and slippery as she tried to get a handhold on them. Keeping an eye on her pursuer, she managed to get a foot into a crevice, and clambered on to the top of the largest one: she knew she could move more quickly jumping across the tops of them – assuming she didn’t slip and break her neck – than trying to struggle round them. Unfortunately it also made her an easier target; but judging from how wide Megan’s shots were going, she didn’t have too much to worry about just yet. with a grunt, she dropped from the furthest rock onto the sandy grass and headed south along the edge of the island.

‘And you didn’t think to say anything?’ Alexander yelled.

John clenched his jaw ‘And how exactly was I supposed to tell you? You were still over there with that bloody girl.’

Alexander let that pass. ‘You could have sent up a flare or something.’

‘Why? For all we know it’s a friend of hers. He – or she –

did come up from the same bit of water after all.’

Alexander grimaced and turned back to the island. From here he couldn’t see either Ace or the mysterious newcomer that John had seen surface. He pushed past John and fetched the binoculars from the cabin. But, sweeping his gaze over the island, he still couldn’t see either of them. Perhaps John was right: perhaps it was a friend of Ace’s – maybe even this mysterious Doctor – and the two of them had gone in search of the elderly couple. But Ace hadn’t exactly given the impression that the Doctor was an Olympic swimmer. A hundred if he was a day, she’d said. That didn’t sound like the figure John had described.

Alexander was still feeling guilty about returning without Ace. He’d never been one for selfless acts of courage, but leaving her there with a couple of weird old people seemed a bit crap, even for him. He tried to console himself with the fact that Ace had insisted. But he hadn’t tried very hard to dissuade her, had he? He’d played it down to John; he knew what he’d say, telling him he never had the courage of his convictions.

‘Why don’t you try to get the radio fixed?’ he said to John, trying to be practical.

‘Yeah,’ answered John. ‘I suppose one of us should do something useful.’

Alexander bit his tongue, clenching his fists until John had taken the remains of the radio back downstairs. Tentatively, he reached out to touch the handrail – and recoiled with a yelp as he heard the crack of the electrical discharge and felt the pain in his hand. The dome was still generating its magic static – even if John managed to repair the radio, Alexander suspected that it would be just as useless as the other one.

Michael paused for a moment, his fingers on the handle of the door to the kitchen extension at the back of the house. Through the frosted glass panels there was no sign of movement inside.

Gently, he opened the door and slipped in. The smell of grease and overcooked cabbage assailed him; on the cooker was a huge pan, bubbling and steaming away. He grimaced, and checked the corridor. Taking a deep breath, he headed for the hallway. A couple of times he had to back into the shadows when he heard voices, and only once did anyone see him – but it was an old man who just nodded politely and went on his way.

Soon he found himself at the foot of the stairs; he could hear the TV in the lounge, and two women arguing about whether this new-fangled ‘Channel 4’ would be nothing but violence and pornography like everyone was saying: Michael grinned when he heard one of them saying that she hoped it would. There was no sign of Mum – she must already be inside. He stopped in front of the main door, realising that he didn’t know where his gran’s room was. Should he just try doors at random, or should he see if he could find one of the battier residents and ask them, hoping they wouldn’t start shouting the place down at the sight of a stranger? Before he had the chance to do either, he heard a shout: a woman’s voice, calling for help from under the stairs.

Suddenly, the door to the cellar was slammed open and a little man tottered out, lurching around as if drunk. His cream hat was jammed on the back of his head, apparently defying gravity as he staggered into the wall.

And just behind him, struggling to keep up despite a painful-looking limp, was Ace.

Chapter Twelve

‘Don’t just stand there!’ grimaced Ace. ‘Help me!’

For a second, Michael was frozen, not sure what was happening, whether Ace was talking to him. He took a step forward to help the

man when a blur of pale movement caught his eyes from the top of the stairs. Standing, red eyes burning in a white face, was the ugliest little man Michael had ever seen. His fists were clenched as he stared down into the hallway.

‘You again!’ he spat, snarling at Ace. ‘You should be dead!’

‘Sorry to disappoint, Ace riposted, running to support the man with the hat who was slumping against the door frame. She glared at Michael. ‘Help me, Michael!’ she hissed again.

Michael looked up to see the goblinesque man looking back along the corridor, clearly wondering whether to fetch help. With a shake of his head, Michael leaned over and heaved the man up, slinging his arm over his shoulder. Mum and Gran would just have to wait. He didn’t know who this little man was, but he had a horrible suspicion.

Lying on her belly, watching Megan prowl around in the shingle twenty feet below her, Ace wished she hadn’t left her rucksack on the boat: one can of nitro-9 and Megan would have been history. Instead, she spent a few happy minutes toying with her, chucking pebbles ever further along the beach. She made sure she picked tiny ones, hoping that, with her bad vision, Megan wouldn’t be able to tell that they were coming from overhead.

Ace threw one final pebble, well down the beach, and watched as Megan took another couple of steps. Sliding backwards, Ace shuffled away from the little cliff’s edge, sprang to her feet and scuttled away. This was beginning to remind her of Sooal’s efforts to hunt her down on board the ship. The only difference was that here she didn’t have the option of the airlock for a quick escape. Of course, she could always just tackle Megan direct, go hand to hand with her armed only with a big stick and properly working eyes - although Megan’s pistol meant that she’d either have to be very stupid, very desperate or very both to consider it seriously. And at the moment, Ace knew exactly which category she fell into.

The sky blazed orange and copper, shrouded by vast palls of black smoke that crawled across it like ink on blotting paper.

Silhouetted against it were the ripped and torn spires of the city, once proud, he imagined, but now pitiful - charred fingers raised up in supplication, begging for mercy. The battledisc on which he flew hummed beneath his feet as he skimmed the top of the forest, spraying death into the treetops below. He glanced back, watching the

spreading wake of flaming destruction behind him.

Above the roar of that unholy, cleansing fire, he could hear the shrieks and cries of animals, and saw flocks of black birds rise from the pyre, wheeling around in the heat, confused and scared.

The city ahead - the last city on the planet - crawled over the horizon, bloody light glinting from its towers and roofs. He could see half a dozen airships rising from it, a last attempt to escape before the attack fleet levelled their home. Smiling grimly, he thumbed the controls on the rail in front of him, speeding up.

And then the world tore down the middle with a thunderous roar, white lightning cracking it into fragments which fell and fell and fell.

Eddie opened his eyes; thin, greenish light filtered through his fingers. Slowly he lowered them and struggled to focus on the trees that surrounded him. And then he remembered the dream and felt sick. Not a sickness of the body, but of the soul -

a deep, shamed sickness that made him wonder, not for the first time, what kind of person he must be to have such dreams. At least this one didn't involve children, begging to be spared, as he mowed them down with weapons that spat white fire; this one didn't involve men and woman, strapped into... *things*... which made them scream and scream and scream; this one didn't feature a mirror, into which he looked, and out of which stared his own face, ugly, brutish and cruel. That was the worst.

They'd done it. *They'd* put this filth in his head. Even with the silver foil that he wrapped around his head at night, they still managed to do it. They were turning him into something obscene, something evil. He looked up at the pale scraps of sky, reassured not to see the blacks and reds and golds of burning worlds.

Eddie turned his head sharply as he heard the heavy sound of snapping branches, figures crashing through the wood. In moments he'd worked out where they were - moving at a tangent to his position. He stayed still, hugged up into a ball in the hollow at the base of a tree, and listened. There were two pursuers and one – maybe two – prey. They moved awkwardly, their steps irregular. Then they paused, and within seconds there was the whine of a weapon and a splintering sound. He sat up, curiosity overcoming his caution. For a moment, he found himself strangely excited at the prospect of a hunt. But then he remembered his dreams and sunk back into the loamy

darkness, ashamed.

The crashing resumed, slowly fading as they moved on through the forest. The thought occurred to him that they were looking for him: but why the shots? Maybe someone else had escaped from Graystairs, someone else whose mind had been soiled and corrupted by the same filth that they'd pumped into him. He heaved himself to his feet: *my enemy's enemy is my friend.*

As quietly as he could, Eddie set off in the direction of the receding sounds. without thinking, his hand went to his side, searching for a weapon. what had they done to him?

Ace and Michael ran as fast as they could, dragging the limp form of the Doctor. She'd never realized that such a small, slight man could weigh so much. Did he have transcendental pockets?

A small planet or two in each one? Michael seemed to be managing OK. Neither of them looked at the other as they fled

– which was fine by Ace, since she really couldn't think of anything to say to him. The pain in her knee had faded, but she was sure that was less to do with its healing than with the adrenalin rushing through her bloodstream.

She'd been surprised to see Michael – although judging from the expression on his face, not half as surprised as he'd been.

He'd stood there, just staring at them, until Ace had broken his trance and told him to help her get the Doctor out. Even then he'd hesitated before sighing heavily and slinging the Doctor's arm over his shoulder. And Sooal had seen them. She smiled to herself, imagining his confusion and anger that Megan hadn't managed to finish her off. If only he knew...

As they reached the road through the woods, they paused to rest. Ace looked back, relieved to see no one following them, although she doubted that pursuers would be far behind: as she, Michael and the Doctor had left Graystairs, she'd glanced back to see Sooal vanishing upstairs – fetching reinforcements, no doubt. She slumped against a damp tree-stump, slimy with lichen, and grimaced at the stains on her jacket. The Doctor was mumbling to himself. She peered into his wandering, unfocussed eyes.

‘Doctor? Doctor? Can you hear me? It’s Ace.’

‘Yes,’ he slurred, staring past her into the woods. ‘Yes, it probably is. I’m the Doctor. Pleased to meet you..’ He waveringly stuck out his hand. Ace took it and gave it a squeeze.

‘Come on – we need to get you somewhere warm, let you have a proper rest.’

‘He needs more than that,’ Michael said – the first thing he’d said since they’d left Graystairs.

‘And what would you know?’ Ace said. She heard him let out a slow, controlled breath.

‘Fine!’ he said. ‘You obviously know better? I’ll just leave the two of you here, shall I? See how far you get!’ He shook his head. ‘I can’t believe I’m helping the Doctor. If it *is* the Doctor.’

She’d briefly told Michael about regeneration, about how the tall, dandified Doctor that Michael had seen just a month or two ago could have been transformed into the innocuous little bundle they were dragging through the woods – but he was still having a hard time believing it. Ace gritted her teeth, on the point of starting an argument. She was feeling ratty with Michael’s secretiveness, worried about the Doctor and in pain from her knee. Starting an argument was actually *just* what she needed at the moment. But she knew that without Michael’s help, she’d struggle to get the Doctor back to the village on her own.

‘Come on,’ she muttered sullenly. ‘It’ll be getting dark soon.

I don’t fancy being out in these woods when it does.’

Suddenly Ace heard a zinging, zipping sound, and a chunk of bark from a tree nearby exploded into fragments and dust. They looked back to see a couple of indistinct figures in the distance through the trees.

‘Oh great,’ Ace said. ‘The bloodsports brigade.’

Michael hoiked the Doctor up, and the two of them stumbled deeper into the wood.

The past few hours, Ace realised, had taken more of a toll on her than she’d thought, and she quickly found herself tiring.

Michael was taking more and more of the Doctor’s weight.

Twigs snapped and cracked like pistol shots under their feet as they carried the Doctor through the trees. Every so often, his legs, brushing the ground, would snag on a branch, pulling them up hard, sending shots of pain through her knee. Behind them they could hear the sounds of their pursuers, crashing through the undergrowth. She drew some small comfort from the fact that they didn't seem to be getting closer. But the throbbing in her knee increased its already frantic tempo, and she motioned for Michael to pause.

'It sounds like they're falling behind,' she said through deep breaths and massaged her leg, wincing. Michael nodded.

'But at this rate, we'll be tiring faster than they will. What's up with your leg?'

She shook her head dismissively. 'It's nothing – amateur gymnastics were never my thing.'

'Are you going to be OK with it?'

Ace nodded, slightly embarrassed by his concern, and looked around her suddenly realising that she hadn't the faintest idea where they were or in which direction they were heading. Great.

A few hundred feet away, only just visible through the trunks of the trees, she could see some sort of hut or shed. She pointed towards it. 'What about that? Maybe we could take a breather in there?'

Michael looked back, listening, and shook his head. 'If they come this way and can't see any sign of us,' he said, 'that'd be the first place they'd look.'

Ace chewed her lip and looked at the Doctor, who they'd plonked down on a fallen tree trunk. His eyes were closed, his lips were moving rapidly but silently. She couldn't work out what had happened to him: he'd been like this – only more talkative –

when she'd first disconnected him from the other sleepers aboard the ship.

'The TARDIS!' she suddenly said.

Michael frowned at her.

'The TARDIS – the Doctor's ship.'

‘The police box – right?’

‘You’ve done your research then.’

‘It’s part of UNIT folklore,’ Michael said, ignoring Ace’s sarcasm. ‘When it makes an appearance, you know there’s trouble round the corner.’

‘You really have it in for him, don’t you?’

‘Like I said – the Doctor means trouble.’

Ace felt herself flushing, defensive. ‘The Doctor *sorts* trouble; he doesn’t cause it.’

Michael gave a derisive snort. ‘You don’t know the half of it,’

he said – and raised his hand sharply as the sounds of pursuit cut through the still, spring air. ‘Come on, we’ve got to get moving.’

They took the Doctor’s weight between them and set off again.

‘If we can get him to the TARDIS, it might help him recuperate... or something,’ Ace finished lamely, realising that she wasn’t quite sure what the TARDIS would be able to do for him. If nothing else, he’d be safe there. She glanced over the Doctor’s slumped shoulders and saw Michael was looking at her with a sceptically raised eyebrow.

‘If it’s hidden in that hut,’ he said, ‘we might just make it.

Any further than that, and we’re gonna get caught.’ As if to underline his concerns, the three of them were spattered with ichor and fragments of bark as another shot rang out, blasting a chunk from a nearby tree.

Ace shook her head. The TARDIS was miles away, up on the hillside overlooking the village. Weighted down with him as they were, and with her knee playing merry hell, there was no way they’d make it there before they were caught. At least, she thought, looking over at the tumbled-down hut between the trees, not if they went straight to the TARDIS.

‘Come on,’ she said with sudden determination. ‘This way!’

‘Where are we –’

‘That hut. Come on.’

Michael gave a disgruntled noise, but Ace didn't care: whoever was following them was catching up, and at the rate that she and Michael were tiring, they could only get closer.

Short of leaving the Doctor out in the open, the plan that had just come to her was their only option.

Eddie hugged the trunk of the tree and slowed his breathing: he was fitter than he would have expected, scarcely out of breath.

There were two hunters – he couldn't see their faces, couldn't quite remember their names. But he knew they were from Graystairs. Maybe these were people who'd been taken over by stuff that had been put into their heads. A man and a woman.

He watched them pause, confer, and set off again. As quietly as he could, he circled round, trying to get a look at who they were hunting – and was surprised to see an ungainly clot of arms and legs and bodies, making good speed away from the two residents. Catching only glimpses of them through the trees it was hard to be sure, but it looked like a girl and a young man dragging the body of another man between them. There was something familiar about the middle figure – brown jacket, cream hat. Eddie screwed up his eyes, trying to remember where he'd seen him before – if he wasn't just a fiction from the stuff they'd put in his head.

They were in a huddle, talking, although the brown jacket man's head flopped onto his chest, and he didn't seem to be taking part in the conversation. Eddie watched the girl look up and cast a long, slow look around the wood. He ducked back behind the tree and waited. A few moments later he peered out to see that the three of them had set off on a new course.

Keeping low, he scuttled through the undergrowth. He knew where – they were going – the hut he'd spent last night in. He shook his head: if they thought they'd be safe there, they were very much mistaken. In a few minutes, their pursuers would see it. It would be an obvious – if stupid – place to hide. What were they up to?

They stumbled into the clearing, the Doctor still mumbling. The hut resembled little more than an ancient, battered outdoor loo, the kind that Ace remembered Nan Dudman having at the bottom of her garden. Considering she was planning to dump the Doctor here for a while, she hoped that this wasn't one –

although at least it would give him somewhere to sit.

‘We can’t hide in there,’ Michael said impatiently.

‘We’re not going to,’ she snapped back. ‘We’re going to leave the Doctor here and then draw them away. Without him, we can move as fast as them – but not too fast – and hopefully they’ll follow us. We’ll lose them, and then we can double back for the Doctor.’

Michael made a cautious noise, although Ace wasn’t sure whether it was approval or suspicion. Considering that he was the big military hero, he seemed a bit short on cunning-plans-for-dealing-with-the-enemy-out-in- he-countryside.

As they approached the hut, Ace’s heart sank: it really *did* look like an outside toilet – although she couldn’t imagine why anyone would build one out here in the middle of nowhere.

Some of the slats were missing from the side, and the door hung at a drunken angle. As she pulled at the rusted handle, she half expected the whole thing to collapse. Inside were a few damp, yellowed newspapers, a small wooden crate and various lengths of twine and wire hung from nails hammered into the wall. They looked a bit like snares, and Ace wondered if it was a gamekeeper’s hut. They settled the Doctor down onto the crate and he looked up at her with pitiful eyes: she wondered whether he actually knew who she was. For one horrible moment, it suddenly occurred to her that maybe Graystairs and the people wired up in the spaceship were all part of some sickening plot to actually give people Alzheimer’s, rather than cure them. Could this be what had happened to the Doctor? Ace realised that her throat had gone tight and dry at the thought, and she swallowed painfully.

‘You wait here, Professor, OK? You got that?’

He looked at her, blank and uncomprehending. She felt Michael patting her on the arm.

‘Come on, Ace. If they catch sight of us here, we’ve had it –

and so’s he.’ He gestured, almost dismissively, at the Doctor.

‘Just don’t move,’ she said, turning to the Doctor again.

‘We’ll be back for you soon.’ Reluctantly, she closed the door, trying hard not to feel like she was abandoning him.

‘All right!’ she hissed, more snippily than she’d intended, as Michael

reminded her that they had to get moving. The sounds of pursuit were becoming louder again, but they still – thankfully

– couldn't see anyone. Which hopefully meant that they couldn't be seen either.

They set off, moving at roughly a right angle to their pursuers' course: they wanted to lead them away from the Doctor, after all.

'So what's the plan?' asked Ace, giving one last look at the hut.

'Stick together,' Michael said. 'If they catch sight of us, we need to be able to fool them into thinking we've still got the Doctor with us. Otherwise they might stop and look around for him.' He put his arm around Ace's shoulder.

'Oi! Cut that out!'

'For God's sake, Ace!' he sighed. 'From a distance, we'll look more like we have the Doctor with us if we do this.' She gave him a look. He shrugged. 'Fine, do it your way. Just remember that I'm the one that's been in the army, not you.'

'Yeah – well maybe you should go back there, soldier boy.'

Michael didn't reply, and Ace felt a bit cheap for throwing that one back at him. She took his arm and laid it over her shoulder and the two of them set off in silence.

It was mid-afternoon and, through the thin canopy of spring leaves, the sun shone brightly – if none too warmly. Michael kept checking behind them, altering their course or speed when they felt that their pursuers were losing the scent. At least, thought Ace with some relief, they've not stopped to look for the Doctor.

She was getting used to Michael's arm around her shoulder, and although she'd never have admitted it, it was rather comforting – but she wished she'd had the sense to do it the other way round, with him taking some of her weight. Her knee was still throbbing.

Neither of them spoke very much, other than to urge each other left or right, or to point out obstacles or landmarks they could use later to retrace their steps back to the Doctor. On the couple of occasions the Doctor's name was mentioned, Ace felt Michael tense up, but she really didn't want to start a counselling session. She glanced at her watch: they'd been running for over half an hour. Ahead, Ace could

see the main road. A red car flashed past, flickering behind the trees. She wasn't sure what they were going to do when they got there. Behind them, the sounds of snapping twigs and crunching footsteps told them that they were still being chased. It seemed odd, she thought, that she'd be more worried if they *weren't* being followed.

'Nearly there,' Michael said.

'And then what?'

'I reckon we should cross the road and head into the wood on the other side – and then hide. With a bit of luck, they'll think we've managed to get farther down the road than they expected

– or that we've hitched a lift. Hopefully they'll call the chase off and head back to Graystairs.'

Ace nodded, and the two of them resumed their three-legged-race-style lumber through the wood until they climbed the shallow bank up onto the road. In seconds they were across to the other side, scrambling back down into the shelter of the trees, Ace's rucksack bouncing around on her back. Michael spotted a dip in the ground under a fallen tree, and the two of them slipped into it.

'Now we play the waiting game,' Michael said.

After a few moments' silence, Ace turned to him. 'I'm bored with the waiting game – can't we play Battling Tops instead?'

From where they were hidden, the slope of the bank not only hid them from the road, but prevented them from seeing their pursuers. They heard them crash through the last bit of the wood on the other side of the road and then there was silence. A muttered, indecipherable exchange of voices. And then more silence.

'Sounds like they're checking out the road,' Michael whispered, his body pressed up against hers in the loamy confines of the hollow. He brushed a bit of earth from her face and then looked away, suddenly embarrassed.

'Don't get any ideas,' she warned in a low voice.

They fell back into their awkward truce-silence for ten minutes. Michael broke it. 'Who was that ugly little bloke back at Graystairs? The one who said that you should be dead. What did he mean?'

'That,' Ace said, 'was Sooal – the bloke that runs the place.

He tried to kill me earlier. Then he sent his henchwoman after me to finish the job.'

'And what happened to her?'

Ace grinned. 'Sorry – can't tell you. If I did, I'd have to kill you.' She grinned again at Michael's expression and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'This is between you and me, right? But I've just spent about 24 hours in the Orkneys, getting cold, wet and dodging bullets – well, energy beams, anyway.'

'So who was it that I was talking to last night? Your evil twin?'

'You don't get it, do you?' she said, revelling – rather cruelly – in his confusion. 'The Doctor's not the only one who can time travel, you know. Anyway,' she said hastily, realising that the thawing atmosphere between the two of them was also thawing her tongue. 'Let's drop it – the Doctor'd have my head on a stick if I told you any more.'

Michael grunted, clearly unsure whether to take her seriously, and they resumed their silence. Finally – and about half an hour after they'd burrowed under the tree – he took a deep breath and began to slide out. 'Come on. They'll have gone by now –

probably into the village.'

Extricating themselves from the rotting tree, they brushed themselves down, all the time keeping their eyes open for any sign of their attackers. The road above the bank seemed deserted. Michael told Ace to stay where she was whilst he checked out the road. A couple of hours ago, Ace would have argued with him; but she was getting tired and just a bit fed up with all of this. She wanted to get back to the Doctor as soon as possible, get him somewhere safe, and get this whole bloody thing over with.

Michael poked his head through the bushes at the side of the road and beckoned her, giving her a hand up the bank.

Cautiously, they stepped out into the road. They were alone.

Ace turned to Michael with a grin – which, to her great surprise, was returned. He wasn't developing a crush on her, was he?

Despite the growing suspicion that Ace was developing a crush on him, Michael couldn't bring himself to dump her. Not yet.

Was he growing soft? Considering how he felt about the Doctor, why the hell was he putting himself on the line trying to rescue him? He suddenly wished that it was Claire there with him, instead of Ace, and immediately felt bad about it.

'Which way?' asked Ace in a whisper.

He looked around. His years in UNIT hadn't been completely wasted, he thought wryly as he recognised the snapped branches, the odd little dumps of bushes and the dips and rises in the ground that he'd made a mental note of on their way out of the wood. The journey back to the hut took only half the time it had taken them to get away, and there was no sign of their followers, which was a relief. They saw the hut and Ace raced on ahead.

'He's gone!' Ace shouted, as she reached the hut and opened the door. Michael instinctively glanced round to see if anyone had heard. He jogged the last few paces.

Ace was right – the hut was empty.

Chapter Thirteen

They searched the area in widening circles for over half an hour before Ace, red-faced and fuming, finally conceded the Doctor's disappearance. Michael said nothing, not sure whether she was closer to tears or to a shouting fit.

'I knew we shouldn't have left him,' she glowered. Michael didn't point out that it was her idea. 'They must have found him.'

He wouldn't have gone wandering off like this on his own.'

She looked at him, as if expecting an answer. All he could do was shrug. 'Maybe he's gone into the village.'

'Or back to Graystairs,' said Ace.

'Tell you what – you check out the village, and I'll check Graystairs.'

There was a pause.

'What about the bloodhounds back there?'

'I don't reckon they'll try anything, as long as they don't catch me before I get back there – not with all those witnesses around. Besides, I need to find Mum and Gran. Even if I am just a soldier boy, I reckon I can take care of myself.'

Ace nodded, a slightly guilty look on her face: Michael reckoned that she'd only just realised that she wasn't the only one with friends and family to think about. She looked at her watch. 'It's about quarter to four. Meet up at the pub around five and compare notes.'

Michael nodded. 'Will you be OK?' he asked, gesturing at her knee, as Ace gave one last look at the hut and set off. She hitched up her rucksack. 'Yeah,' she said, unconvincingly.

'Course I will. I'm Ace, aren't I?'

Joyce woke with a start in Norma's room. She'd been dreaming that her mother had been chasing her, screaming, accusing her of desertion in the line of duty. The elderly woman had been dressed in UNIT combat gear, a machine gun in her hand, her hair glowing a harsh white, like burning magnesium. Joyce shook her head and rubbed her eyes, feeling sweaty and grimy.

Reassuringly, Norma was still there, sleeping soundly. She could hear footsteps outside in the hallway – and then the door opened. Michael's head appeared around it, cautiously. She gave him a bleary, relieved smile. He slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

'Still here?' he asked. He looked anxious, edgy. She saw him glance around the room, noticing the broken glass on the dressing table and the stains on the floor where Mum's toiletries had spilled when she'd swept them aside. 'What happened?'

Where did she begin? 'Mum had a funny turn again – no, she's fine now. Honest.'

Michael stood over his gran, shaking his head slowly. 'She can't stay here,' he said simply. 'You know that. I told you back at the hotel. I thought we'd agreed...'

'If we take her away now, what chance does she stand?' Her own voice had taken on a wheedling tone that she hated. She took a breath. 'She's getting better, Michael.'

He didn't answer.

'What's happened to you, anyway? I thought you were just going round to the back door. You've been gone -' she glanced at the silver fobwatch on the bedside table, '- hours.'

Michael gave a little laugh. 'Oh, not much really. Ace and me have been shot at, the Doctor's gone missing, and I had to climb on the kitchen roof and in through a window to avoid getting caught.'

'Caught? And what do you mean, the Doctor's gone missing?'

'Ace rescued him from that spaceship you told me about, but his head's all screwed up - never mind that Ace swears he's changed his appearance. Someone followed us into the woods when we tried to get him away and took a few potshots at us. So we hid him, intending to go back - and when we did, he'd gone.'

Norma stirred in her sleep, pulling the covers up around her.

'How is she?' asked Michael.

'She seems fine. Doctor Menzies stuck his head in earlier to say that her results were looking good.'

'Well, that's something. Did you ask him about what's going on around here?'

Joyce looked over at her mother. She couldn't hold Michael's gaze.
'No.'

'What? Gran's in this madhouse and you didn't even think to

-' 'Ssh!' Joyce stood up and took Michael out into the corridor, dosing the door behind her gently. 'Your gran's in this madhouse, as you call it, because she's ill. And this might be her only chance to get better. D'you want to ruin all that?'

'I don't believe this!' Michael stared at her disbelievingly.

'Ace and me are getting shot at, Ace says there's a spaceship where people get their brains wired up to a computer, and you want Gran to stay here?'

Joyce glared at him and grabbed his arms. 'Family might not count much for you, Michael; but she's the only grandma you've got. You remember what she was like. D'you want to see her go back to that? Do you?'

Michael couldn't answer. Joyce let go of him.

'I know this whole place is screwed up,' she added, more gently this time, 'but what can we do? Just let them treat Gran, please, and then... then we can sort out what to do.'

The Doctor. That's what he called himself. Just the Doctor.

Eddie remembered the teashop, remembered the way he'd run, scared of what this Doctor was making him think, making him feel.

Just the name brought up the hairs of the back of his neck: doctors had done things to him; doctors were the ones who messed about with your head, put bad thoughts in there, evil thoughts. He remembered the treatment room, being given pills, injections. He remembered something small and metallic being placed on his skin, just in front of his ear. And then it all went dark, fuzzy.

Eddie needed to know more about this man. Something in their curtailed conversation had made him wonder if this doctor could help him.

So now the two of them sat in the shady chill of the boathouse down by the loch, well away from both the woods and from Graystairs. The Doctor just stared blankly ahead, out over the still water, whilst Eddie pulled his cardigan around himself and shivered. He'd lost track of how long he'd been away from the house: at least two days, he guessed. He'd heard the staff blundering through the bushes on a couple of occasions, calling out his name, but he'd stayed low and still. Did they really expect him to reply? To hold his hands up and be taken back to that place? He'd left not knowing where he was going or what he was going to do, and the cold nights in the forest hadn't supplied him with any new ideas. He'd gone into the teashop, looking for something to eat. But the Doctor's arrival had spoiled that. Maybe the Doctor would know what to do now.

'They put things in my head,' Eddie said, trying to keep his voice from cracking.

'Things? What things?' The Doctor's voice was still wobbly, his gaze unfocussed and inclined to slide sideways.

'Bad things.' Eddie tried not to think about the bad things.

'Tell me... more.'

Eddie shook his head. ‘I don’t want to talk about them.’ His voice came out whining and pathetic, and he felt ashamed, inadequate. ‘When we met at the teashop,’ he said after a pause,

‘you talked about being human.’

‘Did I?’ The Doctor seemed genuinely surprised. No wonder, Eddie thought, not if they’d done to the Doctor even half of what they’d done to him. ‘And why did I do that, I wonder?’ He winced as if even his own voice was too loud.

Eddie didn’t know the answer and said so. The Doctor nodded sagely, although Eddie got the impression that he was just playing for time, giving him chance to root around in his own memories, put things in some sort of order. Eventually, when he wondered if the Doctor had drifted out of the conversation altogether, Eddie grabbed his hand.

‘These thoughts,’ he said. ‘These things, here –’ he tapped the side of his head with his other hand, ‘– they’re not, you know, not *right*, are they?’

‘Not human? Is that what you mean?’

It sounded silly put into words like that. *Not human*. Is that what they were doing? Turning him into something *not human*?

The Doctor’s gaze had drifted away again, his eyes glazing over before closing. Slowly, his chin dipped towards his chest. Eddie sat back. Let him sleep, he thought. He needed it.

Whereas before the pub had possessed a certain charm and warmth, now it was just miserable and dead. Ace sat in a corner and nursed a half of bitter. With the Doctor’s disappearance, the act of ordering a pint seemed to have lost the little rebellious thrill that it had held earlier. Claire kept throwing her solicitous glances from the other side of the bar; all Ace could do was to smile back, tight lipped. She checked her watch again. Michael should be here any moment. She tried to work out where the Doctor could have wandered off to, but in his half-baked state he could be almost anywhere. Even, she realised coldly, back at Graystairs. Being subjected to more of Sooal’s experiments.

A wintry draught heralded the arrival of two blokes, both of whom she’d seen around the village and the pub: a fair-haired, ruddy-cheeked rural type who gave her a nod as he came in –

called Douglas, she seemed to recall; and a swarthy, dark-haired chap with a fine, livid scar along his right jaw. He rubbed his hands vigorously as he and his friend went to the bar.

Sipping half-heartedly at her drink, she wondered whether Michael, too, had fallen into Sooal's clutches. Maybe he was down in the spaceship as well, wired up to the machine alongside the Doctor, having his mind turned inside out. She shook her head; she was growing maudlin. After what she'd seen over the past couple of days, maybe she had good reason to. With a sigh, she heaved herself out of her seat and crossed to the bar.

'No sign?' asked Claire as Douglas and Scar-face installed themselves in a far corner and began a game of dominoes. Ace shook her head. 'Maybe he's gone looking for this Joyce woman.'

'Maybe.' Ace wondered whether she should tell Claire about what was going on up at the house.

'Maybe he's actually found her.'

'Could be.'

Claire leaned across the bar. 'They're very good, you know,' she said. 'Up at Graystairs. They've worked miracles with some people.'

Ace realised that Claire had assumed that Ace's 'grandfather' had just had a 'funny turn', and that Ace was worried about his dementia. Maybe she was. Maybe this would be how she felt if, by some miracle, she ever got close to Mum, and if Mum got Alzheimer's. She didn't want to think about it.

Claire tapped her on the arm and she looked up to see Claire staring at the door with a smile on her face. Ace turned. In the doorway was an elderly man in a dark grey cardigan – and, at his side, was the Doctor.

Sooal put down the telephone in the laboratory and smiled at the Tulks assembled around him, edgy and impatient. Their snowy hair shone like watery blood in the orange light. 'One of the care assistants,' he said. 'Someone's told them that they've seen an elderly man and a stranger with a cream hat going into the pub in the village.'

'Can we be sure it's him?' asked a frail woman, her voice hard, her eyes glinting like steel.

Sooal nodded. 'Eddie? I think so.' He chuckled as if at some private joke.

The woman looked round the small gathering, taking in the familiar faces, seeing them clearly for the first time in three years.

Friends, colleagues. She turned to Sooal. 'Forget the Doctor, whoever he is. He's not the important one.' She looked at the-others. 'Follow me,' she said. 'We have a job to do.'

'I think he needs a brandy,' the man said as the Doctor settled himself onto one of the bar stools and gave Ace a not-altogether-focussed smile.

'Water will be -'

'Just have the brandy, Professor,' said Ace, barely able to contain her joy at seeing him. She clasped his cold hands in hers and squeezed them as hard as she could, ignoring his wince as she did so. 'You look as if you need it: With a gentle nod, he acquiesced. 'Where the hell have you been - I've been worried sick about you.'

'It's a long story, Ace. Well,' he grinned ruefully, 'not so much long as puzzling.' He shot a glance past her to the man with whom he'd come in, watching Claire pour a Guinness. 'And blue still leaves a funny taste in my mouth.' He pinched his nose confusingly and looked up, smiling lopsidedly. 'You haven't met a woman called Stacy Chambers, have you? Or maybe Tracy.'

Norma wasn't too sure.'

Ace pulled a shrug with her face. 'Can't say I have. Why? She important?'

'I really don't know. Norma seems to think she is.'

'Maybe she's one of the ones that's vanished.'

'Perhaps. Perhaps.'

'Anyway,' said Ace, as she realised the Doctor's new friend was hovering at her elbow with a pint of Guinness in his hand.

'Who's your mate?'

‘Ace, this is Eddie. Eddie – Ace.’

They shook hands awkwardly.

‘So what happened?’ Ace turned back to the Doctor.

‘I’m not sure – after you and Michael left me, I think Eddie came along and took me to the boathouse down by the loch. I had a bit of a nap, Eddie told me about what they’ve been doing to him up at Graystairs, and then we came back here. I had a feeling this might be where I’d find you.’

‘Hang on, hang on. Rewind a bit, Professor. When I pulled you out of the ship, you were completely gone. What was all that about?’

The Doctor absently rubbed the back of his neck and, somewhat uncomfortably, accepted the double brandy that Claire offered him. He swirled it around in the glass, his brow furrowing as he stared into it. ‘I saw Joyce earlier, back at the hotel,’ he said. ‘She told me how you’d rescued her from the ship. I had to find out what it was all about so I wired myself up.’ ‘And it turned you into a vegetable,’ Ace admonished, watching him sniffing his brandy.

He nodded almost sheepishly. ‘I wasn’t prepared for the fact that it was designed to paralyse its subjects, prevent them from moving about or disconnecting themselves; and it was evidently designed for human brains. I think mine,’ he lowered his voice to a whisper and glanced around the bar, ‘confused it a little.’

‘I know how it feels.’

‘And then, of course, you came along and got me out.’

‘In the nick of time.’

He raised an eyebrow and smiled wryly. ‘Almost as if you’d known exactly what was happening, eh?’

Ace looked away guiltily.

‘I take it,’ he said slowly and carefully, ‘that you haven’t been... careless?’

‘Professor! As if!’

His eyebrow inched higher up his forehead.

'After our little chat,' she said in a whisper, realising that she was glancing around the bar in the same way that the Doctor had, 'I made sure I was a good girl.'

'Well, it's never too late, is it?' He jabbed her, gently, on the nose.

'Anyway,' she changed the subject, suddenly feeling awkward. 'What about Eddie here?'

'Ah! Eddie!' Ace glanced over her shoulder at him. He'd sat down at the bar and seemed to be taking huge delight in his Guinness. She looked back to see the Doctor slipping from his stool and beckoning Ace over to a corner table. She followed him.

'Eddie is a very confused man,' said the Doctor as they seated themselves. 'Apparently he's escaped from Graystairs and they're getting in a flap about his disappearance. That's one of the reasons Joyce sent me the postcard. He went missing a couple of days ago and has been drifting around the woods and village ever since.'

'Most of Graystairs' residents are confused – what's so special about him?'

'For a start, his memory seems to be returning.'

'Isn't that the whole point of the treatment?'

The Doctor raised a hand. 'It's not so much the fact that his memory's returning – or, at least, seems to be. It's what he's remembering that's so disturbing.' The Doctor gave her a quick summary of what Eddie had told her about the horrific nature of the memories that were surfacing. She felt herself go cold as he told her of the burning cities and screaming children. 'Eddie seems to think that the staff at Graystairs are actually implanting false memories in him for some reason.'

'And what do you reckon?'

He shook his head. 'I'm not sure, Ace. My own faculties aren't quite a hundred per cent yet. Whilst I was on board the ship, I had a couple of disturbing flashbacks myself.' He paused.

'Well, one of them was a flashback. A memory of Leela in the snow. But the other one ...' He trailed off, staring down into his glass again.

'So did they put that in your head?'

There was silence. Ace watched his eyes, saw the puzzlement on his face. ‘No – no I don’t think they did. But I think there are two separate treatments going on: the memory implantation and the multiple processor array – the people wired up in the spaceship.’

‘And you’ve no idea what that’s for yet, then?’

He tapped the side of his head. ‘Part of me’s still working on that one. And then, of course, there’s Stacy Chambers.’

‘Who do you think she is?’

‘I’m not sure. Norma seems to think that she’s the key to all of this. She’s heard her name whispered around the place, but I haven’t found her.’

Ace laughed gently. ‘And here’s me thinking that I was the one having all the fun.’

‘Well!’ came a familiar voice from behind her. ‘The wanderer returns!’ She turned. Standing behind her, his jaw tense as he looked down at them, was Michael.

‘Michael!’ she exclaimed, standing up. She moved as if to give him a hug, but read something in his body language, his rigid stance, and thought better of it. His eyes were fixed on the Doctor.

‘You’re looking better than the last time I saw you,’ he said without a trace of humour.

‘Doctor – this is Michael. If it hadn’t been for him, I’d never have got you out of Graystairs.’

The Doctor smiled up at Michael and held out his hand; but Michael’s hands remained resolutely in his pockets. Awkwardly, the Doctor looked at Ace and dropped his hand back to the table.

‘I came to check on Ace,’ Michael said pointedly.

‘What’s going on between you two?’ Ace said, getting fed up with the veiled hints at something in their past. ‘Have you two met before?’

The Doctor frowned and shook his head. ‘Not that I –’

‘No,’ Michael cut in. ‘We haven’t met. Like I said, your reputation goes before you, Doctor.’

'I take it that isn't a compliment.'

Michael milled humourlessly. 'What do you think?'

'Is it something to do with why you came all this way to look for your mum and then were too scared to come out in the open?' asked the Doctor quietly, his eyes narrowing. 'Running away from something, Michael?'

Michael snorted and turned away from them, heading for the door. The Doctor was suddenly on his feet.

'You're not going to get anything sorted out if you keep running away,' the Doctor said softly. Ace winced. It was almost as if the Doctor were spoiling for a fight, trying to provoke him.

Michael turned slowly as the Doctor edged his way around the table until they stood not three feet apart. Ace looked over at Claire behind the bar, poised with a glass and a tea-towel in her hand. Her face was tense: she must have seen this sort of standoff a dozen times before.

'Have we met before?' asked the Doctor again. 'Or have I yet to meet you again?'

Michael laughed – a harsh, barking laugh.

'No, we haven't. But I've heard a lot about you. And I've got something for you.'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows expectantly.

And without another word, Michael drew back his arm and punched the Doctor full in the face.

Chapter Fourteen

'You bastard!' Michael grunted, shaking his arm as the Doctor struggled to sit upright, sprawled amidst fallen furniture, glasses and ashtrays. 'You bastard!'

Claire came hurtling around the bar, tea-towel still in hand.

In the far corner, Douglas and Scar-face looked on, clearly not sure whether they should intervene. The Doctor was trying to prop himself up on his elbows, blood all over his mouth and his chin, spattered down the front of his jumper; Michael, red-faced, was struggling to hold himself back from laying into the Doctor again.

'Right!' Claire bellowed. 'That's *enough!*'

But as Michael took a step towards the Doctor, Ace launched herself at him. She and Michael tumbled backwards, Michael's arms thrown out.

'Ace! No!' sputtered the Doctor, as the two of them went down in an ungainly heap, Ace swearing like a trooper as she laid into Michael. The Doctor staggered to his feet, wiping his face with the back of his hand. He looked momentarily baffled at the copious amount of blood there, but hurried over and began pulling at the waistband of Ace's jeans. Michael's flailing leg caught him on the shin, and with a startled grunt, he hopped away.

Claire grabbed Ace's jacket as Scar-face and Douglas rushed over, and began trying to drag Michael out from beneath the scrum.

'Get off me, you gits!' bellowed Ace, slapping at Claire's arm.

But the combined efforts of Claire, Douglas and Scar-face eventually succeeded in separating them. They squared off against each other, panting, until Ace saw the blood drying on the Doctor's face.

She turned to Michael, red-faced and sweating. 'What was that for? You bully – try picking on someone your own size!'

Michael gave a snort of derision and shook Scar-face's hand from his arm.

'Ask him,' he spat, jabbing a finger at the dishevelled Doctor.

'Ask Doctor Death there!'

Ace began to launch herself at him again, but Claire and the Doctor held her back.

'No, Ace. Let him finish,' said the Doctor quietly.

Ace looked at him – the Doctor's face was dark, intense.

Pained. She gave a look of disgust and pulled away from Claire.

'I'll finish alright, Doctor. I've been wanting to meet you for a very long time. D'you know that? I've wanted to give you that message for months now – and if she hadn't jumped in, I'd have given you the same message from a dozen other people.'

'Ace...' the Doctor warned, almost inaudibly, as he saw her tensing.

He stepped forwards until he was only a foot away from Michael and stared up at him. ‘Why?’

Michael laughed, coldly. ‘Can’t you guess? Are you really so detached from it all that you don’t know?’

‘Michael –’

He turned away from the Doctor and spread his arms wide.

‘This, ladies and gentlemen, is a man responsible for hundreds of deaths. Or would thousands be nearer the mark?’

The Doctor remained silent, a tiny figure at the centre of a growing maelstrom of hatred and bafflement, bemusement –

and, Ace sensed – fear. She stepped forward.

‘OK Michael. Leave it there. I don’t know what this is about, but haven’t you done enough? Look at him. Hardly a fair fight, is it?’

Michael looked back at the Doctor and saw what Ace couldn’t help but see: a small, puzzled man in a hat, blood all over his face and total bewilderment in his eyes.

Ace was tired. And cold. Very, very cold. The wind had picked up, scudding the fat, slate clouds across the dark Orcadian sky.

Within minutes she felt the first fat raindrops on her face. She’d wedged herself into a deep, grassy crack in the convoluted ground and discovered an overhang which she hoped would hide her. But the wind and the rain still whipped against her. For the first time since she’d surfaced from the spaceship, she felt really down – planless, friendless and hopeless. Megan couldn’t be so stupid that she wouldn’t realise that John and Alexander were her only hope for rescue: all she had to do was wait until Ace came out of hiding to attract their attention, and she’d be shot down. Unless, of course, Megan had teamed up with the tweedies, and at this very moment they were closing in on her.

Ace shivered and stared up at the moon.

‘I stuck up for you – d’you know that?’ Michael’s face was a tight knot of anger and bitterness. ‘When I joined UNIT and they found out that I was the son of Doctor Joyce Brunner and General Terrance Ashworth, friend of the infamous Doctor, I got so much stick you wouldn’t

believe it.' He took a heavy drag on his cigarette and blew out a thick, bluish cloud. 'And because I didn't know any better, because I believed all the crap Mum had told me about you – how the Doctor was a good man, a clever man, a friend to the universe and its dog, I argued your case.'

'And what's wrong with that?' asked Ace, bristling.

The Doctor sat in shadowed, thoughtful silence, occasionally touching his nose and wincing. To Ace, it seemed like Michael's attack had thrown the Doctor back to that confused little man that they had rescued from Graystairs a few hours earlier.

'It got me marked out,' Michael answered. 'From then on, I was... oh, you don't want to know the actual phrases they used. I was the Doctor's chum, his pal. His apologist. And then I heard the stories. From the Yeti to the Cybermen; Daleks, Autons, Talichre, the Waro, the Brotherhood of Beltane. All the things the Doctor had gotten involved in, and how, whenever he stuck his nose in, people died. Ordinary people, troops, soldiers whose names the magnificent, legendary Doctor never knew. He had his fun, swanning around with the top brass, saving the world over and over again. But people died.' He stared into the past, eyes glued. 'And they kept on dying. And one particular person...

died.' Michael's voice dribbled away.

'Who?' asked Ace.

Michael paused. When he spoke, his voice was thin and distant. 'His name was Andy. My only real friend in UNIT. We signed up at the same time, similar backgrounds, that sort of stuff. We got a lot of ribbing about it from the others, but we stuck together. And then some aliens called the Talichre tried to invade the Earth. Big, blobby bastards.' He gave a sigh, shook his head. 'Anyway, Andy and me were two of the soldiers brought in; one of the humans that were kindly helping the Talichre get a foothold on the Earth decided to make an example of Andy when the Doctor refused to hand over some device or other that he'd stolen. Whilst the Doctor strutted and preened, showing the Talichre how very, very clever he was, Andy was killed.'

'That's hardly the Doctor's fault, Ace jumped in defensively

'If he hadn't helped, millions could have died. Earth would have been enslaved or wiped out.'

'Maybe. But it didn't stop them hating him; it didn't stop them hating me. And it didn't bring Andy back. The UNIT

soldiers are lads, lads like any others. Everyone thinks that they're oh-so special. Above all that hazing shit, initiation ceremonies for new recruits. But they're not. Believe me, I know.

And if you're not "one of the lads" –' His voice tailed away.

'And what's that got to do with what the Doctor said earlier – with you coming up here?'

'I've had enough,' he said simply, spreading his palms. 'I've had enough of the whole lot. Enough of living in Mum and Dad's shadow, enough of being an apologist for him –' he jabbed a finger in the Doctor's direction, '-when he doesn't give a toss about any of us; enough of being "old Arseworth" to the lads; enough of watching people die.'

Ace shook her head, still reeling from all of it. 'And you didn't tell me any of this 'cos you thought I might snitch on you to UNIT? To the police?'

He looked away from her, nodded. 'There's probably a warrant out for me right now And a court-martial waiting for me when I go back.'

The woods around Graystairs echoed to the sound of footsteps

– sharp, regimented footsteps. In the baleful glare of the moon, hair gleamed silver-white and eyes shone hard and cold, and shards of moonlight glinted off the barrels of guns.

Michael watched Claire tending to the Doctor. Since he'd punched him, the Doctor had done little but sit in the corner, staring into space. Claire had brought him another brandy to replace the one that had been spilt in the fight, but it sat, untouched, in front of him. Claire was telling him, calmly and assuredly, that he'd be fine in a while, but that he should just take it easy. Michael couldn't remember the last time anyone had spoken to him like that, and he felt a twinge of jealousy, made all the worse because he liked Claire – liked her sassiness, her common-sense, charm and scepticism – and wondered whether, if it were him sat in the corner instead of the Doctor, she'd be ministering to him in the same way. He thought of Mum, back at Graystairs with Gran, holding Gran's hand as he had left angrily, unable to believe that, with everything going on up there, Mum still

wanted Gran to stay for her treatment. What was that, then?

Love? Guilt? Daughterly devotion? He shook his head and downed the last of his pint. Across the pub he saw Eddie, sitting on a bar stool and enjoying another pint of Guinness; the old man gazed around the pub with a sense of quiet bemusement.

Every now and then he'd rub his eyes and look up, as if the pub was new to him each time.

The smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke, the last guttering flames in the fireplace and the quiet murmur of other people's conversations around him pulled Michael out of the moment, just for a second, and he suddenly felt sad and isolated, an observer of other people's lives, rather than a participant in his own. Three years he'd been in UNIT, and the closest he'd got to the kind of consideration Claire was showing the Doctor was when Brigadier Bennington had sent him to the medic with a minor head wound. UNIT was laying siege to a dingy, crumbling warehouse in Birmingham where a small group of ape-like aliens called Ogrons had holed up after landing on Earth for emergency repairs. It was his first encounter with aliens, and like all 'the lads' he hadn't believed it until he'd seen them himself –

and even then, there was still a lingering doubt, whispered rumours that these seven-foot thugs were nothing more than blacked-up Special Operations guys testing them – or taking the piss. That was one rumour that hadn't lasted the day.

He remembered dearly how UNIT had surrounded the warehouse, shot out the windows and had to kill one of the Ogrons before the others had been captured. He remembered crouching in the Brummie drizzle, watching the other lads as they passed around a ciggie – studiously avoiding giving it to 'old Arseworth' – and made comments about the birds they'd picked up in town the night before. He remembered having to force himself not to simply stand up, put down his gun, walk back to the truck and ask to be relieved of duty. He remembered being at the front of the team with Andy as they'd gone rushing in, smashing down the doors and racing across the vast expanse of concrete, the sound of booted feet on broken glass, orders barked in whispers. Only briefly, as he'd squatted down behind some sheets of corrugated iron, had he wondered if he were about to be picked off by some alien weapon; and if his brief, wasted life were to end there. But the Ogrons had been surprised, and only managed to let off three or four harmless shots before they were overpowered and dragged, grunting, off to the truck.

A ricochet from one of the other UNIT lads' guns had left him with a small – but bloody – bullet graze to the top of his head, and Bennington had insisted that he'd got it seen to.

One small moment of kindness in three years.

He glanced at Ace, who seemed to be avoiding him, making small talk with Scar-face at the bar. He caught her eye, but she looked away quickly, almost disdainfully. Even as he thought about it, he felt angry: Ace was a nice kid, but what right had a kid to be telling him how he should be running his life? She didn't know what his life had been like; she hadn't had her head forced down army toilets as part of an 'initiation'; she hadn't had the mickey taken out of her when all the others pretended they'd been replaced by alien bodysnatchers, advancing on her in the darkness of the dorm, arms outstretched.

He remembered Sergeant Callow telling him that it was 'just youthful high spirits' and that they didn't mean anything by it.

What had really hurt was that Callow had told him that his dad had probably gone through the same thing when he joined UNIT. Somehow Michael found that difficult to believe: the Great General Ashworth with a mouthful of piss. It would have been funny if it hadn't made him want to cry. And some of them did cry.

And he remembered Andy, fresh in from the regular army just a couple of days after him. Michael had heard him screaming in the middle of the night, and had discovered him huddled in the corner of the room: in his bed was a shrivelled alien hand with three stubby fingers.

Michael put down his empty glass, watching a thin trickle of foam dribble back down the inside, and decided that there was nothing he could do here. He felt stifled and excluded and unwanted, and had the rest of his brandy and something half-decent to smoke back at his tent.

Suddenly, one of the windows of *The Two Foxes* shattered with a *whumpf* of compressed air and a spray of powdered glass; tiny, sparkling motes drifted languidly down like snowflakes.

Douglas dropped the pint he was halfway through pouring for Ace, startling Michael for a second time.

‘Get behind the bar!’ yelled Ace, pushing a table up against the heavy oak front door. ‘Everyone!’

She seemed like she was everywhere at once – authoritative, knowledgeable, in control. For a moment, he hated her. Really hated her.

But he didn’t need telling twice, and almost collided with Douglas as he ducked behind the bar. Birmingham all over again.

Ace raced around to join them, pushing Scar-face ahead of her, as another window blew in. Eddie stared round, frightened and confused, as Ace called to him to get behind the bar with the rest of them. He complied silently.

Michael watched her as she looked back at the Doctor, propped like a broken toy in the corner. His unfocussed eyes wandered across the windows, confused. Claire sat worriedly by his side, still holding his hand. They were sheltered by the fireplace, and it seemed the best place for them to stay. She was taking all this remarkably well, Michael thought ruefully, and wondered if there was anything he could do that might make him less of an onlooker to all of this. Anything that might make her think a bit better of him: if he’d ever had any chance with Claire, he imagined that hitting the Doctor had probably put paid to it. Thoughts of returning to his tent were suddenly gone now that something was happening, now that there might be something he could actually do.

‘What the hell was that?’ asked Claire, squeezing the Doctor’s hand so hard that Michael was sure he saw the Doctor flinch.

‘Directed energy weapon,’ said Ace knowledgeably, rummaging in her rucksack.

‘What?’ said Scar-face.

‘Just keep your head down,’ she said, finding what she was looking for.

‘If you come out now,’ a thin, elderly voice called from outside, ‘we’ll let you live. We just want Eddie. The rest of you will be unharmed.’

‘As if,’ Ace muttered, twisting the cap on the silvery canisters she held, no bigger than a can of shaving foam. She held her breath and sprinted across to the side of the window. Michael could see her

counting silently to herself, Then she spun round and lobbed the canisters through one of the broken windows.

‘Down!’ she called to them all, throwing herself under a table.

Moments later, every remaining window in the pub exploded inwards in a shower of glass shards and splinters. Michael, Douglas and Scar-face felt the fragments pattering on their heads as the sound of the explosion rang in their ears. Douglas cautiously peered over the bar to see Ace kneeling on the window seat looking out onto the street.

‘Yes!’ she said exultantly, punching the air. ‘Come on – out the back! They’re only stunned.’

As Michael dusted himself down, feeling the cuts from the tiny slivers of glass, he realised that Ace and Claire were bringing the Doctor through, Eddie shuffling along in front, confused and scared. The Doctor’s gaze seemed sharper, more in focus now He paused and stared straight into Michael’s eyes.

‘I’m...’

‘Come on, Professor,’ cut in Ace, as she gently guided the Doctor past him, through the door to the back of the pub.

Michael watched them go, heard the glass crunch under their feet: the theme tune to the last three years of his life.

Chapter Fifteen

The night air was cold, and there was already a thin, sugary crust of frost on the ground, catching the moonlight. Michael’s breath swirled around him as he followed the others out into the darkness of the car park amidst the crates and the bins and the empty stale bottles. As soon as they were clear, Douglas and Scar-face made off into the darkness without a backward glance.

Michael watched them go, reminding himself that they were just civvies, scared and out of their depth. He reached into a crate of empties at his side and armed himself with two beer bottles, hefting them in his hands. Not much as weapons went.

Whatever Ace had thrown through the window had shaken their attackers, and they were clearly playing it cautious. He caught up with Ace, the Doctor, Claire and Eddie as they headed across the small patch of grass between the car park and the church. If Ace was leading

them to the church, he hoped she had a plan. He kept glancing behind him, but it looked like their attackers had given up – for now. No doubt they'd be regrouping. And attacking again. Only this time they'd be more careful.

As he watched Ace and the others slip in through the vestry door, he paused, realising what had just happened. It was like being back in UNIT all over again. He'd gone AWOL only to find himself up against it. Again. What scared and disturbed him the most was the automatic ease with which he slipped back into it, as if the uniform were indelibly tattooed on his skin in shades of green and khaki. In his hands were the two bottles. He lifted them, as if to throw them at the side of the church.

Instead, he tossed them onto the grass and walked away into the night.

The little stone room smelt of damp and cold, the single bulb casting a harsh light over the huddled group. Claire pulled a chair up to the table and settled the Doctor in it as Ace stood in the doorway for a moment, staring out into the sharp night. Where was Michael? He'd been behind them, right up to the moment they'd ducked into the church. She searched the darkness, but there was no sign of movement. She glanced at Eddie, hovering uncertainly beside the door. She knew what was going on in his head – but he looked as confused as she felt about why they wanted him. Reluctantly, she closed and bolted the door. Then, just for good measure, shoved a chair under the handle. She had a brief flash of the TARDIS's control room, the Doctor looking edgy and evasive, the door wedged shut with a chair.

'I should just go,' Eddie said, but his uncertainty showed in his eyes, in the way he held himself.

Ace shook her head firmly. 'We're not letting those nutters get hold of you.'

'But if they have me, they'll leave the rest of you alone.'

'I don't care. You think they just want you so they can give you a special birthday tea or something? Those people aren't normal, Eddie. They haven't come down here with guns just 'cos they're bored with watching *Sale of the Century*.'

'So what do they want?' Eddie looked close to tears. He sank into a vacant chair at the table and ground the balls of his hands into his

eyes, pressing hard. He looked back up at Ace and ran his hands through his silvery hair, eyes burning with tears. ‘I’m scared,’ he said, so quietly that only Ace heard him. She took his hand and felt it clench in hers.

‘We all are. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.’

Eddie looked back down at the table and began to cry. Ace saw that Claire had heard their exchange and was shaking her head slowly.

‘I’m not particularly dim, but have I missed something?’ she asked quietly.

Ace frowned, puzzled.

‘Like the bit where someone explained what the bloody hell is going on!’ She looked round the little gathering. ‘Am I the only one who feels like they’ve stepped into the next *Star Wars* film?’

Ace gave a sigh and perched herself on the edge of the battered pine table. She looked at the Doctor, his eyes closed, his head drooping onto his chest. He’d stopped muttering and trembling. She hoped it was a good sign.

‘Sooal up at the house is an alien who’s been doing some sort of experiments on the residents,’ she said, as matter-of-factly as she could. ‘They have a spaceship at the bottom of the sea where they have a dozen residents wired up to some sort of computer.’

‘And...?’

Ace spread her hands wide. ‘And...?’

‘And what’s all this for – and note I’m pretending, just for the sake of argument and sanity, that all this is real and true, and that it’s not you who was due to be booked into Graystairs instead of the Doctor?’

Ace smiled grimly. ‘Yeah, I know. *Twilight Zone* stuff, eh?’

Well, trust me. It’s all real. But that’s all I know.’ Ace held Claire’s eyes, knowing full well that she was lying: she’d seen the future and she couldn’t breathe a word of it.

‘OK,’ Claire said suddenly. ‘Until I can think of a more reasonable explanation for all this, I’ll go with it. So what do we do now?’

‘I wish I knew,’ Ace said. ‘I really wish I knew.’

‘There’s only one thing you can do,’ Eddie said suddenly.

‘Let me go to them.’

Ace sighed. ‘I’ve told you. No.’

Eddie shook his head. ‘I don’t know how I know,’ he began, stumbling over his words, ‘but I know they don’t want to hurt me.’ He looked from Ace to Claire and back to Ace again. ‘They just...’ His face scrunched pitifully. ‘They’re just... putting things in here.’ His clenched fists went to his temples.

‘Then that’s a good enough reason not to let them have you, isn’t it?’

‘But if I don’t go, they’ll kill you. I know it.’

‘Ace!’ It was Claire. Ace followed her eyes – the Doctor was sitting perfectly still, hands clasped in front of him, his lips moving. She leaned in closer, and could hear him counting.

Backwards.

‘Three... two...’

On ‘one’ his eyes snapped open and he took in a deep, deep breath – and held it, before letting out slowly.

‘Professor?’

He turned his head slowly towards her and smiled. ‘Hello Ace,’ he said, wincing slightly. ‘Too loud,’ he mouthed, still smiling.

‘Are you OK?’

He nodded, eyes closed. ‘Just had to... shut down for a while.

Repair the damage. I thought I was alright, but Michael’s punch must have set me back a little.’

And suddenly Ace was hugging him, squeezing him until she heard him squeak. And then hugging him a bit more. Eventually she let him go and sat back down. ‘Professor... They want Eddie.’

‘I thought they might. I’ve remembered something that I’d forgotten. Maybe Michael’s punch was just what I needed to jolt things back into place. I’ve just remembered that I met Eddie earlier on – before he found me in the hut.’

‘Are you sure they haven’t just put that in your head – like Eddie says they’ve been putting stuff in his head?’

The Doctor shook his head, his sharp eyes fixed on Eddie.

‘No, I don’t think so.’ He looked up at Ace. ‘But Eddie’s wrong.’

At this, Eddie’s head shot up. ‘It’s true. You said so.

“Inhuman things” you said. *Alien* things.’

‘I was wrong.’ The Doctor’s voice had dropped to little more than a whisper.

‘But what about all the stuff in here... the killings and the burnings? Where did that all come from?’

The Doctor held his gaze steady on Eddie’s eyes. ‘It was in there already, Eddie. They haven’t been overwriting your memories with new ones: they’ve been restoring the old ones.

And I rather suspect that the memory loss of at least some of the residents isn’t due to natural causes.’ He looked from Claire to Ace. ‘And the worrying thing is that the memories that are being recovered aren’t those of happy childhoods and trips to the seaside with the grandchildren.’

‘Alien things,’ breathed Ace, looking at Eddie as she remembered his words. Outside the vestry were an assortment of Graystairs residents who were quite probably aliens. And they’d locked themselves in with one of them.

Clustering together in the cold, starry night, five old people came together in the darkness of the churchyard. They all carried short, stubby weapons, silver grey.

‘He’s in there with them,’ said Khamrain, the woman formerly known as Beanie. She stared at the church, suppressing a shudder at the primitive belief systems that the place embodied. Something that, she hoped, would soon be a thing of the past. There would be no room for such atavism in their glorious new order.

‘They have weapons,’ said Natillo, an uncomfortable caution in his voice. ‘The concussion device they used may be just a sample. We have to be careful. We can’t risk injury to ourselves.’

Khamrain threw a sneering look at him. ‘Fortune favours the bold, as I seem to recall they say here.’

‘And death, the foolhardy,’ added Hamaeia – who’d previously gone by the name of Harry.

‘So what do you suggest? That we leave him in their hands?’

If they know the truth, they won’t hesitate to kill him.’

Hamaeia gave a snort. ‘They don’t have the stomach for killing in cold blood. No matter how *alien* they think he is, they won’t be able to see past the fact that he is a frail, old man.’

Hamaeia’s voice turned wheedling and pathetic, mocking, as he finished the sentence.

Khamrain smiled. ‘What do you suggest?’

She looked at the faces of her comrades: some, she could tell, were with her; but others were dearly confused, thrown by the sophistication of the explosive device thrown at them earlier.

They had not expected such weapons from the humans, such resistance. They could not risk the death of any of their number.

Without Eddie their plans could not progress.

Khamrain made a decision; and as she took a step towards the vestry, not a single voice was raised in argument. That was all she needed.

The Doctor took Eddie’s hands in his, but Eddie refused to look into his eyes. Eddie’s own were red and sore; on the table lay a snotty tissue that Claire had found in the pocket of her cardigan.

‘Eddie, listen to me,’ the Doctor said. ‘I can help you. If that’s what you really want.’

‘I don’t know.’ Eddie looked at Ace, then at Claire, seeking their opinion, unsure of his own.

Ace glanced at the Doctor and then back at Eddie. Then back to the Doctor. Did he really know what he was doing? Just a few hours ago, he’d been a gibbering wreck: when she’d dragged him from the sleeper chamber aboard the spaceship, he hadn’t even recognised her. And now here he was, offering to bring back the memory of an alien – an alien who had friends out there who were trying to kill them.

Could they trust him to make such an important decision now?

‘It’s what I might remember that scares me,’ Eddie said.

‘What I might become.’

‘We all have our ghosts,’ said the Doctor. ‘Things we don’t want to remember. But sometimes we have no choice, Eddie –

not if we want to be honest to ourselves.’

Eddie nodded as if he understood. ‘What do I have to do?’

Khamrain paused at the vestry door, noted the warm sliver of yellow light that bled under it. She couldn’t hear anything.

Perhaps they’d escaped through the building, in which case there was nothing they could do – for now. Silently, she pressed her ear to the thick, wooden door.

Claire watched as the Doctor placed the tip of his finger between Eddie’s eyes – and jumped as Eddie threw back his head sharply, his mouth wide open.

‘What’s happening?’ she asked.

Ace shushed her, pulled her aside. ‘The Professor’s trying to get Eddie’s memory back. And no, I don’t know how he does it.’

The two of them watched as the Doctor whispered to Eddie, taking him back. They couldn’t hear what he was saying. Eddie just kept shaking his head gently, rocking in his seat. But three minutes later, the Doctor straightened up with a tired sigh and turned to them. ‘His memory’s blocked by something far more sophisticated than just trauma-induced amnesia. I was hoping that he was close enough to a breakthrough... I thought that maybe just one little push...’ His mouth tightened in annoyance.

Then he gave a shrug. ‘Maybe I’m not quite back to my old self.’

Eddie was coming round. Claire crouched down beside him.

‘You OK?’

He opened his eyes and stared at her muzzily, frowning.

‘What...? Who are... oh yes, yes.’ He looked around the small crowd of

solicitous faces. ‘Didn’t work, did it?’

Claire squeezed his shoulder. She couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘Only one thing to do, then,’ he said, gripping the edge of the table. ‘I’ve got to go out there – to them. Maybe they can bring my memory back.’

‘You may not like what you remember,’ the Doctor warned.

Eddie nodded. ‘But like you said, sometimes we have no choice.’ His jaw was tight, his eyes harder and narrower than Claire had remembered them. For a second, he seemed like a different person, and Claire was almost glad that the Doctor hadn’t been able to bring his memory back.

Khamrain pulled away from the door as she heard the heavy bolt being drawn back. The others were gathered in the darkness at the side of the church and she quickly moved to join them.

‘Well?’ asked Jophan, impatiently.

Before she could answer, a block of yellow light slanted across the grass from vestry door and a long silhouette bled into it. As the shape, hair backlit and burning white, stepped onto the lawn, the door was closed and bolted behind it. For a moment, the figure stood there, clearly uncertain. It turned its head to and fro. Khamrain stepped forward so that she could be seen.

In silence, it moved towards her until they stood not three yards apart.

‘Eddie?’ she said, hesitantly.

The figure shook his head. ‘Matrin,’ he corrected her, his voice clipped and precise. ‘Onaaka Matrin, Commander of the Second Tulkar War Fleet. It’s good to be back, Khamrain. Very good indeed.’

Chapter Sixteen

‘Professor!’ hissed Ace as they stepped from the crackling ground of the wood onto the solid earth of the roadway. ‘Look!'

He followed her gesture. In the darkness, limned by moonlight, were two figures, motionless at the edge of the trees. Ace squinted and, for a moment, wondered if they were just twisted tree stumps, given the semblance of people by the dark and the shadows. Something moved

at their feet, a small, black shape.

Two eyes, catching the moonlight, sparkled back at her like tiny sapphires.

'We've got to get away,' she said urgently under her breath, and pulled at the Doctor's sleeve. But he held firm, frowning at her. 'Why?'

'Because. . oh, just because, Doctor. Trust me.'

He frowned and allowed Ace to pull him in the direction of Graystairs. She glanced back to see that the shadows were on the move, stepping over fallen branches, picking their way through the moonlit debris of the wood as if they were robots, silent and creepy. Like three mechanical assassins, they advanced on Ace and the Doctor. Ace remembered the events of the night before

-and suppressed a shudder.

Since Eddie had walked out of the vestry, things had happened quickly: the Doctor had jumped to his feet, announcing that, now that they had Eddie, the endgame had started. Claire had tried to get an explanation from him as to what the hell was going on, but he'd been too busy ordering everyone around to listen. He'd told Claire to get herself back home. She'd offered to call the police, but the Doctor had told her not to, saying that it would just mean more senseless deaths.

Perhaps Michael's outburst had made an impact on him –

perhaps he was realising the importance of 'the little people'

Wonders would never cease.

Suddenly, the shadows detached themselves from the spiky blackness of the wood, stepping into the broken moonlight in front of them.

'Good evening,' said the tweedy woman with a coldness that totally belied the words.

'Good evening,' the Doctor replied, raising his hat with his free hand. 'Lovely evening for a stroll, isn't it?'

'It is indeed a good evening,' answered the tweedy man at her side, looking from Ace to the Doctor and back again.

'I'm the Doctor – and this is Ace. I remember seeing you in the village... are you local?'

The woman barely glanced at the man as she said ‘No, not really.’

‘Visiting Graystairs, then?’ The Doctor waved in the direction of the house.

‘That is our intention, yes,’ replied the man.

Ace suddenly remembered the dog, and looked around to see it standing behind her, cutting off her retreat. Its eyes shone with reflected moonlight, still that strange blue, as though illuminated from within. She swallowed.

‘Well perhaps we can go up together,’ suggested the Doctor, and stepped forwards. But the tweedies didn’t move. He caught sight of the dog, moving round to stand at the tweedies’ side, and wagged his fingers at it. It stepped forwards and gave a cautious sniff before glancing up at its owners in an oddly human gesture.

‘Careful Doctor,’ Ace warned him, remembering what the dog was capable of.

‘Beautiful little dog,’ the Doctor said, ignoring her and regarding it curiously. He looked up at the tweedies. ‘Well, a beautiful facsimile of one, anyway.’

He glanced at Ace, a smile playing round his lips. ‘Very realistic, wouldn’t you say, Ace?’

‘I’m sorry,’ the woman said in that distant, unconcerned voice of hers. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘The dog,’ the Doctor said. ‘Very realistic.’ He bent closer to it and it backed away, its eyes fixed on the Doctor. ‘What is it? A Landine?’

For the first time, Ace was almost staggered to see a break in the steely composure that the tweedies had shown so far. They glanced at each other, their eyes widening visibly. ‘How do you –

’ ‘How do I know? Well, when you’ve seen one gene-tailored guardform, you’ve seen them all.’

‘A what?’ whispered Ace, tugging gently at his sleeve.

‘A guardform?’ The Doctor drew himself up, as if preparing to give a lecture. ‘Well, not much more than a wild animal genetically modified, bred and conditioned to act as the ultimate in loyal guard

dogs – if you'll pardon the expression.

Polymorphic, I assume? Landines usually are.'

The tweedies seemed almost lost for words.

'Oh well, I don't suppose it matters,' the Doctor said, saving them from having to answer. 'And if it's a Landine, that would rather suggest that you two are Annarene. Am I warm?'

'You know rather a lot for a human,' the man said, his voice suddenly becoming much thinner and reedier, inflections and intonations creeping into it that made it almost musical.

'I know rather a lot for anyone, actually. And I'm not human
– at least not in the way you think.'

'Why are you here on Earth?'

'We're here to help a friend. What about you? Unless I'm getting confused – and I must admit I've been doing rather a lot of that recently – Earth isn't in the Annarene Protectorate, is it?'

The man looked at the woman, and Ace wondered if they were communicating telepathically. He looked back at the Doctor. 'We are here on a surveillance mission.'

Aren't you just! thought Ace, wishing she could pull the Doctor to one side and tell him what she knew about the tweedies. Tell him that they weren't to be trusted; that they had some sort of coffin device that stank of rotting flesh and that-

'And who,' continued the Doctor, 'are you surveying, exactly? The house? Sooal? Perhaps you know a certain Miss Chambers that we're having difficulty locating.'

At the mention of Sooal's name, the two of them gave odd little jerks and glanced at each other again.

'Wouldn't it be quicker if we just talked,' the Doctor said tiredly. 'Having to read the nuances of your rather badly-practised body language every time I say something is going to become very wearing – not to mention time-consuming.'

'Who sent you here?' asked the man.

The Doctor gave a sigh. ‘You know, if I had a penny for every time I’ve been asked that.. Have you noticed,’ he said, turning briefly to Ace, ‘there’s a very unhealthy sense of paranoia around here.’ He turned back to the tweedies, grasping the handle of his umbrella with both hands. ‘I haven’t been sent here by anyone. I came to help a friend – Doctor Brunner. I don’t know if you’ve met her.’ Their faces were blank. ‘Oh well. As I said, she asked for our help and here we are. Now, what about you two – three?’ he added, glancing at the dog.

‘Sooal is a war criminal,’ the man said slowly, glancing at the woman as if seeking her approval. Ace was sure she saw a small, almost imperceptible nod. ‘Four years ago, the Tulkan Empire was on the point of making a decisive strike against the Protectorate. But we succeeded in capturing the Tulkan War Council and sentenced them to have their memories wiped and to be incarcerated on a penal world.’

‘Most merciful,’ the Doctor muttered.

The man continued as if the Doctor had said nothing. ‘But the ship taking them there was hijacked, stolen by Sooal and his followers. They fled to Earth. When the treachery of Sooal was discovered we followed them here.’

‘I suspected something of the sort,’ said the Doctor airily -

although Ace suspected that he’d suspected nothing of the sort.

‘And Sooal’s been trying to revive their memories, has he? Not a very efficient mind-wipe you performed on them, was it? And With Eddie’s memories revived, I have a feeling that this little drama is entering its final act.’ He looked up at the house and pursed his lips. ‘And I do so hate to miss final acts, don’t you?’

Who’s buying the popcorn?’

And with that, he stepped neatly around the tweedies and set off for Graystairs.

Ace caught up with him, glancing over her shoulder to see the tweedies striding purposefully after them, the dog at their side. ‘I thought Eddie’s memory was still blocked.’

‘That’s what Eddie wanted us to think – otherwise we might not have been so keen to let him go.’

‘So they’re ready to do... whatever it is that Tulks do, then?’

'Murder, conquer, enslave, brutalise? Oh yes, I imagine they're quite ready to do that. The only question is,' he lowered his voice as they walked, 'why they haven't already started it.'

Why is it that they were so desperate to get Eddie restored?'

'Maybe they just thought it would be bad manners to start without him. Anyway these Annarene -'

'Careful, Ace,' the Doctor said, not looking at her.

'Remember: walls have ears. And so do they,' he added thoughtfully.
'Their fleshsuits do, anyway.'

'Fleshwhat?'

'The Annarene are skinny orange things with knobbly exoskeletons – like big, mobile Twiglets. Those two are wearing fleshsuits.' He came to an abrupt halt and turned to face her, smiling grimly at his own joke: 'Wolves in sheep's clothing, you might say.' He started walking again, hearing the footsteps of the Annarene close behind, as they reached the foot of Graystairs'

stone steps. 'The missing sheep, Ace,' he explained as he saw her puzzlement. 'Their regenerator must be malfunctioning, and they need a lot of replacement biomatter to keep their fleshsuits in good condition.' He muttered something else, but Ace was too busy remembering the stench of decay and the coffin device in the Orcadian tweedies' cottage. She felt sick.

'So they're wearing costumes made up of dead animals?'

'Frogs and snails and puppydogs' tails. Not to mention cats and sheep. And anything else organic that they can find.'

Anything else organic. And she'd left John and Alexander all alone.

It was unfair. Unfair and cruel. Joyce watched her sleeping mother and tried not to let herself cry again. Despite all Doctor Menzies' kind words about how Mum was responding to the treatment, her earlier outburst somehow seemed to erase all that, plunging Joyce back into a despair that she thought she'd left behind. But what she knew she could never leave behind were the things she'd said to her mum. *Harsh words can never be taken back* her gran used to say. It didn't matter that Mum had been having 'one of her funny fits', that she probably wouldn't remember what her daughter had said. The words

were said, the genie out of the bottle.

She watched her mother breathing slowly, occasionally, muttering in her sleep. Her eyes flickered around under her lids, but Joyce didn't want to know what dreams – or nightmares –

were being acted out in her head. Her own were more than enough.

She wished she could summon up some joy, some gratitude for this new lease of life that her mother seemed on the point of taking up. But she felt like a spiteful, ungenerous child: here Mum was, responding well to a treatment that might rid her of the Alzheimer's, and all she could think about was how she'd wished the heart attack had killed her.

The cellar kitchen in Graystairs seemed an unlikely location for the gathering that Sooal was currently presiding over. He stood, patiently, whilst the Tuiks trooped in, led by the confident figure that, for the last three years, had gone by the name of Eddie.

Some walked erect and proud, cruel, smug smiles on their faces as they revelled quietly in their restored memories. One or two still seemed slightly confused, as they sifted the memories of the last few years, shunting them aside – sometimes almost reluctantly – in favour of their original memories, their *real* memories. And Sooal could still read disappointment in one or two faces – disappointment that they'd been awoken from a dreamless sleep to find that their bodies had aged and shrunk, that their empire had been swept away, and that they were stranded on an insignificant world with only Sooal's promises to give them hope for the future.

But Sooal had no pity for them. They'd already lived lives over twice as long as he could expect to live. And it was their genetic science, their interference, that meant he'd be dead in less than five years. Without their unwitting help, of course. If any of them saw the sneer that he tried to hide, they didn't react.

He looked around them, gathered in an uncomfortable circle, leaning against the worktops, one or two perched on the benches.

'It is an honour to have served you,' he began, lowering his head deferentially. As he raised it, he caught sight of a couple of contemptuous looks. He knew that some there regarded him as dirt, an insect that had dragged itself above its station. He had to fight the temptation to remind them that, without him, they'd still be drooling in their beds, shouting at the staff and crying themselves to sleep in

the middle of the night.

‘Where is Megan?’ asked Khamrain.

‘I sent her to attend to a threat to your safety,’ Sooal replied.

‘She hasn’t returned yet.’

‘So the threat is not yet neutralised?’ That was Harry.

Hamaeia, Sooal corrected himself. Always a cautious one, and no less so now that his memory had been returned.

Sooal hesitated. ‘I have seen to it myself,’ he lied. Now would not be a good time to put doubts and uncertainties in their heads. He needed them strong, confident and full of their own superiority.

‘So...’ Matrin – a far cry from the hesitant, uncertain Eddie that had disappeared from Graystairs a couple of days ago – let out a long sigh and gazed round the gathering, a satisfied smile on his face. ‘We are complete.’

Sooal bowed his head again.

‘You have done well, Sooal,’ Hamaeia said. ‘You have brought us out of the darkness.’ There was a murmur of agreement from most of the others – although Sooal noticed a pointed silence from one or two of them.

Khamrain gave a low growling laugh, quite at odds with her frail, white-haired appearance. ‘And now we will lead the galaxy into an even greater darkness,’ she said slowly, her eyes glittering bloodily in the orange glow of the fluorescent lights. There was an appreciative chuckle from the assembled aliens. ‘The Tulk Empire will rise again.’

‘And it shall be greater and mightier than before,’ Sooal said.

‘Now, first things first...’ From his pocket, he pulled his datapad and handed it to Hamaeia. ‘The codes,’ he said simply. ‘If you would be so kind, we can begin our subjugation of this world.’

The datapad passed from Tulk to Tulk, each of them keying in the segment of the code that, for so long, Sooal had coveted, worked towards. Only twice did they pause, obviously mistrustful of Sooal, despite the fact that he had rescued them, brought them to Earth and

restored their memories.

When the datapad reached Jophan he paused and looked round the others. ‘Are we sure that this... this pig-rat is to be trusted?’

Khamrain took Jophan’s hand. ‘How can we doubt it? Sooal has spent years of his life planning for this moment, putting himself in danger. If the Annarene were to find out about his support for us, his mind would be wiped as ours were. And without the weapons in the stasis chamber, we are powerless here: we cannot capture this world with a handful of pulse rifles.’

Jophan looked at Sooal, hovering obsequiously. ‘We will attend the opening of the stasis chamber, naturally,’ he said haughtily.

‘Of course,’ Sooal said. ‘It will be necessary to remove it from the water first, but that will not be difficult.’

Jophan nodded and, still with a clear air of reluctance, tapped in his fragment of the code – the code that would unlock the stasis chamber. And once it was opened, he would have access to the weapons that the Tulks never had a chance to use against the Annarene. As well as one other, very special device.

He passed the datapad on, and one by one the Tuiks added their individual segments of code. Soon they had finished.

Sooal thanked them. ‘Now, I think, we should drink to our success.’ There were nods and murmurs all round, as Sooal gestured that they should all go upstairs. One by one, they trooped out of the laboratory, through into the kitchen.

‘Oh, one more thing,’ Sooal said suddenly as Khamrain reached the door to the stairs. ‘I forgot to give you this.’

Puzzled, they all turned – to see the slim, sleek shape of the energy rifle he held, trained on them.

‘Long live the Tulkan Empire!’ he whispered, his face cracking into a grin.

And then he fired.

Chapter Seventeen

‘Stasis chamber. .’ whispered the Doctor, apparently to himself.

'Stasis chamber! And I've been looking for a woman called Stacy Chambers!'

At the foot of the main staircase, sheltering in the darkness, the Doctor turned to Ace, his face painted with horror. In the distance, they heard the sizzle of the energy rifle and the screams of the Tulks as Sooal gunned them down. Ace turned to the Annarene, just behind them: their expressions were unreadable, but she felt sure she could see the faintest twinkle of glee in the eyes of the woman.

'What's a stasis chamber?' asked Ace.

'The ultimate in safe-deposit boxes,' he whispered through gritted teeth. 'A bubble of damped space-time, frozen and impenetrable.' He turned away from her, eyes narrowing. 'This,'

he said after a moment, in cold steely tones, 'has got to stop now.'

And before she could stop him, he strode boldly into the laboratory.

Joyce stood on the dark landing, listening to the gentle, homely sounds of snoring, wondering why her own home never really felt like one. She shook her head: she knew she was just being maudlin, reacting to the events of the last couple of days. Mum, Michael's sudden appearance and revelation, everything that was going on around her. Weirdness was what she did for a living –

but that had always been other people's weirdness, weirdness she could approach with a detachment that she hadn't had to try too hard to cultivate. Now she found herself struggling against clicking back into that detachment, scared that if she managed to turn it on, she'd never be able to turn it off again. It was like her comfortable, familiar UNIT lab-coat instead of her tweedy skirt and jacket – practical and eminently sensible, but just not appropriate right now. She wondered what had happened to the Doctor, and whether Sooal would continue her Mum's treatment. She didn't trust him an inch, but Mum was responding to the treatment, God damn it. And she wasn't about to see her mother's future vanish in a puff of her own self-righteousness.

Sooal surveyed the carnage before him with quiet satisfaction.

Piled into the tiny kitchen, like the remains of a macabre bonfire, were the smoking, blackened bodies of the Tulks, one or two of them still twitching feebly, still clinging to life. He fired again –

just to be sure.

The door to the back stairs opened cautiously. He raised the gun again, and lowered it when he saw that it was just the human woman – Joyce? – who'd been rescued from the processor. He wasn't sure what she was doing down here, but it was only a minor irritation. At the moment nothing could spoil his triumph.

'Well?' he said, when she finally looked at him.

She was clearly speechless. It occurred to him that she'd probably never seen death on this scale before – and certainly not in this manner. Perhaps he would be doing her a favour if he shot her now, added her body to the carbonised pile.

'If you're going to be sick,' he said wearily, 'there's a sink over there.'

But she just stared at him, her eyes glittering with tears. 'You monster,' she said. 'You absolute monster.'

'I've been called worse,' Sooal said.

'Oh, I'm sure you have,' said a voice from behind him. Sooal whirled to see the Doctor standing in the doorway to the laboratory, a look of intense sadness on his face.

'You must be the Doctor,' he said graciously. 'Nice that you could come back to us.'

'Unfinished business,' the Doctor replied frostily. His gaze swept over the bodies at his feet. 'Was all of this really necessary?'

'Don't shed any tears for the Tulks, Doctor,' Sooal sneered.

'Ogrons in dinner jackets. Animals, every one of them.'

The Doctor stared at him with the coldest, most withering look that Sooal had ever seen. Behind the Doctor were the girl and two old people. At their feet was a scruffy black dog.

'I see the cavalry has arrived,' he said. 'That is the correct phrase, isn't it?'

'Too right, you scumbag!' growled the girl. 'You are *so* going to pay for all this.' She glanced at the two old people behind her, as if looking for confirmation. There was something odd about them, thought Sooal. Not their faces – more the way their faces hung *on* them. Like fleshy, saggy masks. He had a bad feeling.

‘What about my mother?’ It was the woman again.

‘What about her?’

‘Her treatment... what about her treatment?’ The woman was almost trembling, although whether through anger or fear, Sooal wasn’t sure. And, frankly, didn’t care.

‘I’m sorry, Doctor,’ she said softly, looking past Sooal at the man in the cream hat. ‘You understand, don’t you?’

The Doctor nodded gently. ‘It’s not really up to me any more, though,’ he said. ‘Sooal is a war criminal and has to answer for his crimes.’ He stepped aside and looked at the couple behind him. ‘These are Annarene and they’ve come to take Sooal back for trial.’

Sooal brought his gun up sharply – and suddenly found it inexplicably tangled up in the handle of the Doctor’s umbrella. It was jerked from his grasp and flung over the Doctor’s shoulder into the laboratory where it clattered loudly across the floor.

Sooal watched the plodding shape of the Annarene’s dog – their Landine, he realised, with a sick feeling in his stomach – retrieve the weapon as if it were a stick thrown for its amusement and hand it over to its master.

‘Doctor. .’ said Ace, ‘something’s going on here.’ She gestured at the female Annarene.

She was smiling as she looked round the room, shaking her head slowly and deliberately. ‘From where did you get that idea, Doctor?’ she said with infinite patience. ‘What is it that makes you think that we intend to take Sooal back to Annares?’

The male Annarene raised Sooal’s gun. ‘Now that Sooal has the access codes for the stasis chamber, we intend to take them for ourselves. And with the weapons contained in it, we will make this planet the centre of an empire mightier than the Tulks ever dreamed. The legacy of the Tulks is ours.’

Chapter Eighteen

This was one of those moments, thought Ace. One of those special Doctor Moments when, with a triumphant ‘Aha!’ he’d produce something out of thin air – a bit of gubbins from his pocket, a clever plan he’d been hatching for the last few hours, secretly knowing what

was going on but keeping it from everyone for dramatic effect.

But he did nothing.

'Don't tell me,' she said, a cold, sinking sensation gripping her. 'It's as much a surprise to you as it is to me.'

'Not at all,' he huffed, drawing himself up. 'Why else would our friends here have been content to watch and wait for all these years?' He turned to the Annarene who, still pointing the gun at them, had backed into the laboratory 'If you'd genuinely wanted to bring him to justice you would have done it long ago.'

He tipped his head back and glared at them.

Go gettem, Professor! thought Ace, hoping that he had something a little more concrete up his sleeve than a stern look.

'I assume you don't speak for the Annarene Protectorate,'

the Doctor said. 'They'd never countenance this. They're peaceful, humane –'

'And weak,' cut in the male Annarene with a sneer. 'Annares was once one of the greatest powers in this sector – until some of our leaders decided that the way forward for the Protectorate lay in pacifism and "forging bonds". Some of us decided that there was another way –'

'And when the Tulks were caught and sentenced,' the Doctor interrupted, clearly determined not to be outdone in the cutting-in stakes, 'I presume you found out about this cache of weapons – what are they? The usual? Mind-controllers, solar disruptors? Meme bombs? – and decided to give Sooal here a little helping hand in rescuing them.'

Ace couldn't remember ever seeing someone's mouth drop open quite as widely as Sooal's did then. He was genuinely shocked, she realised, by the fact that he hadn't accomplished all of this on his own. She wanted to laugh; but somehow, on the eve of world domination, it didn't seem entirely appropriate.

'So I went through all of that – all of these years stuck on this pitiful planet – for *nothing*?' Sooal said bleakly, looking as if he were unable to believe that his marvellous duplicity had been outdone by a couple of aliens wearing shellsuits made of skin.

He took a step towards the Annarene, but the male shook the gun, a gentle reminder.

‘We knew Sooal’s intelligence would be insufficient to facilitate the rescue of the Tulks, recover the stasis chamber, escape and revive the Tulks’ memories without assistance,’ the male said casually ‘So our faction helped them – covertly, of course – and then we followed.’ Its voice held no smugness –

just a creepy sense of superiority, inevitability in the success of their plans. ‘We had awareness of the stasis chamber and the weapons and the fact that you would collect them before taking the War Council into hiding. Unfortunately, our stupid Annarene brethren had all but obliterated the memory of the codes from the Tulks’ memories. We had knowledge of the fact that you were an expert psychobiochemist, and of what you would plan to do. We simply facilitated your work.’

Sooal’s fists were clenching; Ace wondered if he would be angry and stupid enough to attack the Annarene.

‘A tracer was planted on your ship and then we followed you here,’ the female Annarene continued. ‘One team was assigned to observe your operations at this location, another at the site of your ship’s landing. Then all we needed to do was to wait for you to revive the Tulks’ memories, and obtain the codes. Now that they are in your possession, travel will be made to the landing site, the inputting of the codes into the control sphere will be completed, and the weapons will be ours.’

The control sphere! For Ace, it all suddenly fell into place.

‘So you did trash the boat and steal John’s find!’ she snapped without thinking, sudden outrage at the damage inflicted on the brothers’ boat flaring up in her.

‘Ace!’ hissed the Doctor, and she turned to him, feeling her face burn red. He gave a sigh and rolled his eyes.

‘What? It’s true – and if you’d let me, I could have told you they were up to something when we first met them!’

She glared at the Annarene – who were looking puzzled.

Well, she assumed they were puzzled: considering they were just things wearing squelchy artificial faces, it was a bit hard to tell.

But they were glancing at each other, clearly confused by what she'd...

Oh bog, she thought. Big mistake.

She glanced at her watch, and realised why the Doctor had given her that look: it hadn't happened yet. The Annarene on Kelsay hadn't trashed the boat yet; they hadn't stolen the control sphere. In fact, if she remembered things correctly, they were still in their cottage. That's what the Annarene in the Orkneys had meant when he'd thanked her.

She looked at the Doctor. He couldn't have known what she knew – but she could see that he'd read her expression. After being a good girl and keeping her gob shut all this time, she'd blabbed about the future, blown it all. She thought she'd been so clever, so smart. Duh! Ace. Just duh!

'I am confused,' said the female Annarene, fixing her eyes on Ace. 'The control sphere is not yet in our possession – has it been detached from the stasis chamber?'

'Sorry,' Ace bluffed wearily, knowing even as she did that she was convincing no one. 'I must be getting confused. Forget I said anything.'

'Contact the other team,' the female said to the male.

'Ascertain whether the control sphere is in their possession, and if they have searched the boat.'

The male nodded. 'And the humans?'

'Imprison them with the Caarian – until we have the control sphere and the stasis chamber, they should be kept alive. But first...'

For a moment, Ace wondered who this 'Caarian' was – until she realised that they meant Sooal. He glowered at the Annarene.

In other circumstances, she might have commented on how seething anger actually gave a little colour to his cheeks.

The woman wriggled her neck – strangely, impossibly – and Ace heard a soft, wet, splitting sound, like a melon slowly being pulled apart. The Annarene reached behind her head and Ace winced, as the woman's fingers dug into the flesh at the base of her skull. Her face went suddenly slack, becoming nothing more than a mask as she

pulled, peeling the fleshsuit over her head. It came away with a reluctant sucking, clinging to her face. The creature – Ace couldn't thing of it as a *her* any more – shook its head sharply, disengaging the last threads of the fleshsuit, and the mask fell loosely across her chest, blood-matted hair dribbling down her jacket.

The creature underneath lifted its head – its bony, orange head, crested with two rows of darker bumps, like split peas, running back from the forehead – and the two disconcertingly human eyes blinked sharply. The mouth, little more than a lipless gash, twitched and – macabrely – smiled.

'You have no idea how liberating that felt,' it said. What made it so much stranger was that it was still the woman's voice

– slightly more inflected, more musical, but still distinctly hers. It waved a disconcertingly still-human hand towards Ace, the Doctor and Sooal. 'Incarcerate them whilst I remove the rest of this... this *filth*.'

The Annarene began to peel the rest of the fleshsuit away from its chest as the male nodded and gestured with the gun for them to move towards the storeroom. Only then did Ace realise that Joyce was missing: she must have slipped back up the stairs when no one was looking. Ace hoped that she'd be back soon –

with help.

'Whassat?'

Alexander jolted, suddenly brought back from his guilty reveries about abandoning Ace, as John's voice came from the front of the boat. Long, wavering shadows staggered drunkenly across the deck as the lamp swung to and fro. John came padding through the pool of light, his face grim, tired and irritated.

'What?' Alexander asked, wondering if he'd missed some sign from Ace, back on the island. Maybe she'd just lost her torch. Maybe she'd found that transmat thingy that she'd been looking for and had gone home. No, he didn't think she was the type to desert them, even if she did seem awfully keen to get back to this Doctor.

John raised his finger to his lips and cocked his head on one side. 'Listen,' he whispered.

Above the gentle slopping sound of the waves against the hull, oily

and glutinous, there was another sound. Over the weeks that they'd virtually lived aboard the boat, Alexander had become accustomed to the myriad creaks and squeaks of the vessel – the shrinkage and expansion of the timbers, the pained groans of rusty metal on rusty metal – to the point where he didn't hear them any more. On the rare nights he'd spent on the island, he'd found the lack of any sound but the wind vaguely disturbing, as though something vital had been snatched away, leaving a void that nothing could fill. But as he listened, he heard it – a tiny scrabbling, scratching sound, amplified by the boat's hull. As one, they looked down at the edge of the deck. John peered over the side. But it must have been in complete shadow, and he stepped back, shaking his head.

The yelp that Alexander emitted when the shiny black thing crawled over the edge of the boat onto the deck was, he later admitted, just a little bit girly. But John jumped back in alarm, perhaps saving his life. At that moment, something sprang through the air and slammed against the cabin wall.

It was about the size of a small dog, black and bristly with short, stumpy legs ending in splayed claws. Alexander was immediately reminded of the tweedies' little dog. Ace had thought there was something creepy about it, but surely this couldn't be the same thing...?

Glittering blue eyes darted from one brother to the other, as if assessing which of them to go for first. Fortunately, the two of them saved the creature the trouble. As if they'd read each other's minds for probably the first time in their adult lives, the two of them stepped to the railing and vaulted over, disappearing into the blackness with one huge splash.

As Joyce entered her mum's room and saw the figure helping her mother to her feet, she had a sudden flashback to the morning of her attack – until she realised that it was Michael.

'What are you doing?' she asked, still flushed and breathless from her flight from the charnel house in the cellar.

Michael turned sharply, his face set determinedly. 'Don't stop me, Mum. We have to get Gran out of here. I know she's having her treatment and all that, but –'

'OK,' Joyce said simply, placing her hand on Michael's arm.

He jerked his head back sharply, and Joyce felt ashamed at what

passed momentarily through his eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, but she shook her head, shushing him. ‘You’re right. This place is no place for your gran.’

‘But what you said earlier – about her treatment –’

‘It doesn’t matter. We’ll sort something out. Let’s just get her somewhere safe.’

He smiled at her, cautious, tight-lipped. ‘The B&B?’

It was Joyce’s turn to smile.

In all her travels with the Doctor – through all the ups and the many, many downs – Ace had never felt quite as alone as she did now. She’d made her way up to the top of the cliff, and stood looking out across the black sea. She turned back to the island and the wind roared in her ears, whipping her hair around her face. It was starting to drizzle again, and she could hear the pattering of the rain against her jacket. The tiny figure that she was sure had been Megan was out of sight behind the rising slope of the cliff. She looked down the slope in the other direction: the roof of the tweedies’ cottage shone silver in the moonlight. She wondered what John and Alexander were doing now; whether they’d abandoned her for good; whether Megan or the tweedies had somehow got out there and...

She didn’t want to think about ‘and...’

‘Good evening!’

Ace whirled around and almost lost her footing on the friable soil at the edge of the cliff. Standing behind her was the tweedy man, the dog at his feet. His hands were hanging loosely at his sides – which somehow made him seem more alien than anything – instead of being jammed into his pockets like they ought to have been. On his face was plastered a cold, beatific smile. And how the hell had he managed to creep up on her like that? She stepped away from the cliff edge and glanced around, wondering where the woman was.

‘Nice weather,’ she said edgily. The man nodded, his mouth still stretched in that curious rictus. She looked down at the dog, its eyes catching the moonlight, its fur looking oddly smooth and wet.

‘The moisture content of your atmosphere is not to our taste,’ he said distantly – and Ace realised he was staring out to sea, towards John and Alexander’s boat. She felt a chill and took a step back. As the

ground beneath her sank away slightly, she remembered how close she was to the edge of the cliff, and did an awkward sideways shuffle. The man turned his head suddenly, sharply, his eyes following her, hawklike and predatory.

'I understand we have you to thank for the location of the control sphere,' he said, a hint of a smile on his pudgy lips.

'What?'

'The control sphere from the stasis chamber,' he said. 'Your friend took it aboard the boat. We would have found it eventually, but you have saved us much effort.'

'What are you talking about?' Ace's head was spinning. Did he mean the metal thing from the dome on the bottom of the sea? What did she have to do with it? She opened her mouth to ask him what the hell he meant, but he was staring past her. Ace followed his gaze. Standing twenty feet or so behind her was Megan, the menacing, moonlit shape of her rifle cradled in her arm.

'About time,' Ace said cockily. 'What kept you?'

Megan took a step forwards, hefting the gun in her hands, keeping it trained on Ace and the tweedy man. 'You have no idea how you're going to suffer for what you've done to me.'

Ace turned to the tweedy man. He seemed to have tensed up. Had she got it wrong about Megan and the tweedies?

Weren't they in league with each other after all? It hardly seemed to matter now. Megan was clearly about to kill her, and, finally, she had nowhere to run. She risked a glance over the edge of the cliff, but down below all she could see were the silver-flecked wavetops as they dashed onto the rocks. Not much of an escape route.

'It's too late now,' said the man out of nowhere.

Ace turned to him sharply: was he talking to her? No, he was looking at Megan.

'Too late?' she echoed. 'For what?'

'The control sphere is in our possession,' he said.

It was Megan's turn to be puzzled – it showed clearly in her eyes: she

looked between the tweedy and Ace, as if trying to work out who was working with whom.

‘How do you know about...’ Megan’s voice tailed away as a look of horrified – and angry – realisation crossed her face.

‘You’re Annarene!’ she hissed.

The man simply smiled – and, as if following a silent cue from him, a soft droning filled the air. He turned and looked into the sky. Gliding like a huge, airborne manta ray, was a black diamond shape. It thundered overhead, only just visible against the clouds; then it turned, wheeled around, and flashed away into the night. The man turned back to them and smiled. ‘It’s being conveyed. We have won.’

Chapter Nineteen

‘Oh no!’ spat Megan, ‘oh no you don’t – not after all we’ve been through!’ and raised her gun.

There was a sparking crack and something flashed at the tip of the gun. Instinctively, Ace threw herself aside, rolling away from the cliff, her knee jarring painfully against a rock buried in the grass. As she tumbled, she caught a brief, horrifying glimpse of the man sinking to the ground. He clutched his arms to his chest and howled in pain. She watched as an unearthly fire built up *inside* the man’s body, lancing out through his open mouth, his eyes, his ears. And then he vanished in a burst of such painful brilliance that Ace threw her hands over her eyes.

Because of that, she missed what happened next; when she finally dropped her arm it was to the sound of slavering and growling. Something dark and spiky launched itself from where the man had been standing and sprang at Megan.

The dog. But. . it had changed. In the darkness, Ace could hardly make out what it had become, but it was something far sleeker and far deadlier than the little terrier. A scrabbling, chitinous black thing, it seemed attached to Megan’s throat; and as she screamed and tried to tear it away from her, it extended oily black tendrils around her neck like blind worms. She staggered backwards, accidentally kicking the gun in Ace’s direction in her panic. She could just about make it if she ran for it, Ace thought, eyeing up the weapon. But before she could, there was a final scream from Megan. She lost her footing at the edge of the cliff, and she and the. . whatever it was. . toppled over the edge.

Then there was silence. Feeling her heart thumping in her ears loud enough to drown out the wind and the rain, Ace crawled to the cliff edge on all fours, gritting her teeth against the pain in her knee, and peered over. Sprawled face down, broken on the rocks below, was Megan, the remains of the thing that had been a dog still wrapped around her neck, crushed against the damp, sea-licked stone.

The door slammed behind them with a heavy finality that sent Ace's spirits into her boots. She looked around the storeroom and kicked sullenly at a cardboard box filled with baked beans, positioning her blow exactly between the two dents she'd made in it earlier that afternoon. Her knee yelled at her to stop.

'Don't bother looking for an air vent or anything,' she said as she saw the Doctor scanning the ceiling. 'Believe me, I know.'

'How?' Sooal eyed her suspiciously.

'Because I've spent an hour in here already – before I rescued the Doctor from your machine. I suppose I should thank your psycho sidekick for telling me what was happening to him.'

'Megan?' He stared at her, curious. 'Yes, what did happen to her?'

'Well, about now,' Ace glanced at her watch, frowned and shook her head, 'she's probably spreadeagled on the rocks waiting for the sea to drag her body away.'

'Where?'

'In the Orkneys, pig-eyes – where you sent her to finish me off.'

'Ace, Ace!' The Doctor's voice drifted over the shelves. She could see his hat above a drum of cooking oil. 'We should be concentrating on getting out of here.'

'Don't you go backing him up,' she called back. 'After what he's done –'

'That's the whole point.' The Doctor suddenly appeared, his hat in his hand. 'I'd really like to know more about what he's actually done.' His eyes narrowed and he tipped his head back, staring at Sooal. 'And why.'

'We know what he's done. What does it matter why?'

The Doctor raised a finger to his lips and Ace grunted.

‘So?’ The Doctor stared at Sooal. ‘Now that the Annarene have foiled your plan, why not let us in on the big secret?’

‘And what big secret is that?’

‘Well, cruel and psychotic as you are, I find it hard to believe that you’ve done all this just to get hold of some big guns. Let me throw some ideas at you, and you tell me if I’m getting warm.’

Sooal cocked his head on one side, and Ace had to try really, really hard to stop herself from punching the smug little monster. She wished Michael were here now. ‘Go on then, Doctor. I’m intrigued to hear how such a great, deductive mind

– currently locked in a storeroom – works.’

The Doctor gripped his lapels. ‘The Alzheimer’s treatments are obviously a side-effect of your attempts to remove the memory blocks on the Tulks – and a lucrative one, too. Funding for all of this, no doubt. And the multiple processor array down in the spaceship was just a bit of insurance in case some of the Tulks died before you got the codes from them – and, I imagine, in case they proved less tractable than you’d hoped.’

‘But we know all that,’ Ace interjected with forced calmness.

‘Patience, Ace. Patience.’ He turned back to Sooal. ‘An awful lot of trouble to go to for weapons – especially weapons that you may never get a chance to use. Not when you consider that you’ve probably got, oh, about five years of life left. Maybe ten.

Am I right?’

Ace frowned, puzzled, but Sooal’s wide eyes showed that the Doctor had hit the nail on the head. Five years left?

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘Ever heard of progeria?’

Ace shook her head as Sooal hissed. ‘How much do you know?’ he asked with a sneer.

‘Not much more than anyone with good eyesight could have known, really – and a knowledge of congenital neuroendocrinological

disorders, obviously. The first time I saw you I realised it. And your reaction to *La Traviata* gave me a clue: poor Violetta, dying of consumption. Full of self-pity, a life cut short.' He turned to Ace, almost as an afterthought, his eyes still on Sooal. 'Progeria, Ace, is premature ageing. Sooal here is much, much younger than he looks – and, judging by his appearance, probably won't live to be much older. So I take it there's something in that stasis sphere that you think will help you.' 'A metabolic stabilizer,' he said softly. 'The Tulks were working on one, hoping it would extend their lives indefinitely, when the war came to an end. Unlike the Milks, I'm not convinced of the merits of immortality: all I want is my normal lifespan. The stabilizer was designed to counter the effects of the changes they've engineered in my people – a sop to some of their favourite collaborators. Maybe I'm just not as trusting as I once was, but I'm not prepared to take a chance on their refusing me the stabilisation.'

The Doctor nodded. 'As motives go, it's a good one. It must be galling to see it all snatched away from you by the Annarene, though.'

Sooal bared his teeth – and, not for the first time, Ace was reminded of a cornered cat.

Maybe he had better hearing than his mum; maybe his years on the front line of UNIT had developed some sort of sixth sense when it came to strange happenings. Whatever, as the black, diamond shape slid through the night sky over the B&B, Michael found himself at the window, staring up at it. It was almost noiseless, just a low rumble and a gentle breeze announcing its arrival.

'What is it?' asked Joyce, seeing him standing there, gazing up into the sky. Gran slept soundly, oblivious to the nightmare that was unfolding around her. Clutched tightly in her hands was a silver fobwatch.

'Some sort of plane – maybe a spaceship.' He grinned, hardly believing that he was saying it. She came over to join him at the window, but it had passed out of sight in the direction of Graystairs. She grabbed his arm as he moved towards the door, her eyes silently pleading.

'Come on, Mum – this is what we UNIT people do,' he said.

'You're not a UNIT person anymore,' she replied levelly, challenging him. 'or have you changed your mind again?'

'Maybe old habits die hard. Stay here with Gran.' He grabbed his jacket from the back of the door, gave his mum a quick hug, and was

gone.

He reckoned it was heading for Graystairs. Where else?

Pausing in the darkened hallway, he realised that, even at a steady jog, it would take half an hour to get to Graystairs. With a wry grin he reached under the reception desk for the keys to Angus's motorbike. With luck, he'd have it back before Angus ever knew it was missing.

Outside, it was cold and crisp, a frosting of ice making the path glimmer and sparkle. He ran round the side of the house to where Angus's pride and joy was standing; and, as quietly as he could, he pushed it from its stand and wheeled it out onto the road. Jumping aboard, he let it coast fifty yards down the hill before he fired up the engine, hoping that Angus wasn't so tuned in to the sound of his baby that, even in his sleep, he'd hear it.

The last thing Michael needed now was the police chasing after him – if they weren't already.

Joyce leaned out of the window, narrowing her eyes in the hope of seeing Michael. Her room was around the back of the hotel, so it wasn't until she heard the faraway, guttural roar of Angus's motorbike and saw its dim lights flare into life like distant coals, that she spotted him. For one silly moment, she wondered if she should call UNIT HQ and tell them what was happening. *This is what we UNIT people do.*

Right now, though, she wasn't a UNIT person. Just a mother and a daughter.

Less than fifty yards away from him, vague wisps of steam rising from the thawing grass, Michael could see the craft: low, sleek and utterly black. It had landed in the field at the back of Graystairs. Michael had left the bike at the front and sprinted to the hedge from where he now watched. An arc of soft yellow light, like a rip in the night, curved across the front, illuminating a figure, silent and unmoving. The light pushed out a long, skeletal shadow across the grass – a shadow that fell on another figure, coming from the direction of the house.

But where the first was just a middle-aged woman, the newcomer from Graystairs was nothing so prosaic. The height of a man, it was all stick-thin limbs and joints, elbows and knees.

Like a skeleton painted in washed-out blood, it advanced, and then inclined its ridged head sharply. The woman did likewise.

Michael heard a muttered exchange, the wind and the distance rendering the words incomprehensible; the woman reached into a bag slung over her shoulder and produced something, offering it to the twig-thing. It touched it, almost tenderly, with slender fingers; then the woman returned it to the bag and the two of them headed for the house. Silently, Michael followed.

‘Can we go yet?’ asked Connie, her voice full of trepidation, unsure as to whether she really wanted the answer. Jessie shook her head and pulled back from the window, letting the flowery curtain fall back into place.

‘Not just yet,’ Jessie said. Connie nodded, blankly. She’d always deferred to her older sister: Jessie was the sensible, practical one, the one who paid the bills, sorted out their savings, dealt with salesmen; Connie was, by her own admission, the scatty one – the arty, creative one who tended the garden, did the decorating and sewed garish cushion covers. She let her hand rest on a gold brocade one that she’d made in the last few days, taking comfort in the texture of the fabric, the warm familiarity of it. The two of them had been in the room for what seemed like days. After that Joyce woman had disappeared, they’d wandered around the house, avoiding the other residents, avoiding talking about what had happened to them. Although they both knew what had happened, there was a shared, sneaking suspicion that they might have imagined it: that the whole thing, perhaps, had just been a horrid dream or the scraps of something they’d seen on the TV. But as the night had drawn on and they’d realised that half the residents didn’t seem to be around, they’d got more scared and had gone to Jessie’s room.

For the fifth time, Jessie set about rearranging her ornaments and china knick-knacks on the dressing table, moved her slippers a few inches to the left – and then pushed them under the bed completely. Her sister sat, looking at the cover of a magazine that she’d read at least three times, wondering if there was anything to be gained from reading it a fourth. Connie had suggested that she went downstairs and tried to phone their sister, to get her to come and take them away; but Jessie had vetoed it, clutching her sister’s arm until Connie had agreed not to go.

Connie’s need for the toilet was becoming unbearable. She wished she’d had a commode in her room – some of the residents did – but as she’d explained when they’d arrived, both she and Jessie were perfectly fine in *that* department thank you very much. How she regretted it now.

'It's no use, Jessie,' she said after a few minutes of jiggling on the bed.
'I've got to go.'

Jessie was staring into the dressing table mirror.

'Jessie, did you hear me? I've got to –'

'Ssh!' said Jessie. 'Can't you hear it?'

'Hear what? Oh, please Jessie. I *have* to...'

Her voice tailed away as she heard a faint, thin sound coming from far away. Someone calling her name.

'Who is it?' she asked Jessie. 'They're calling me.'

'No they're not; they're calling me.'

Connie listened harder. No; it was definitely *her* name they were calling.

Connie... Connie, can you hear me?

'Yes,' she answered out loud, cautiously 'Yes I can.' Jessie turned to her, a puzzled frown on her face.

'He asked me the same thing,' she said, almost in awe.

Jessie, heard Jessie.

Connie, her sister heard.

They looked at each other, an expression of fear and wonderment passing between them.

Help me, the voice said, wavering in and out like a bad wireless signal.
Please... I need your help.

The Doctor sat on a large drum of cooking oil, toying with –

but, thankfully, not actually playing – his spoons. He tumbled them absently over and over the backs of his fingers until Ace snatched them from him and shoved them in her pocket. She tried to engage him in conversation, but he seemed distracted, almost pained, waving away her concerns with his hand and pulling his hat down over his eyes as if shutting her out. It seemed very unlike him, and it disturbed her. She was poking around in the boxes and cartons on the shelves,

realising that they'd actually only been locked in for less than an hour, wondering what kind of meal she could cook up with salad cream and instant potato, when she heard a noise outside, a heavy thump.

Michael smiled when he found himself looking round for backup: it was frightening how automatic the reaction was, checking over his shoulder, expecting to see reassuring blurs of dark movement, the rest of the team. But there was only blackness and silence, wrapping around him like the smells of pine and boiled cabbage. He moved to the top of the cellar steps, the fluting voices of the aliens receding into the background.

He'd followed them in through the kitchen door and when they'd paused in the dining room, he'd taken his chance. He didn't know what their next move would be, and he didn't know where the Doctor and Ace were – if they were still alive – but from what Mum had said, most of the action seemed to be concentrated in the cellar. It was as good a place to start as anywhere.

He clasped his hand to his mouth. *What was that smell?* It was... he hardly wanted to think about it. Burned, charred meat.

Flesh. He'd almost forgotten what his mother had told him of what Sooal had done to those aliens. A thin, yellowish haze of grease hung in the air, made even more visceral by the orange-tinted lights overhead. He stepped quietly into the laboratory and paused, holding his breath as he listened.

Through the open doorway at the far corner of the lab, he could hear a gentle crunching noise, like a dog with a bone. He needed a weapon. Stacked on one of the shiny steel workbenches was a pile of huge pans, each big enough to boil a small child in. The grim humour in the thought made him shudder, as, wincing at the inevitable noise it made, he lifted the topmost pan. The chomping sound from the other room ceased abruptly, and Michael backed away from the door, holding the pan like a club.

He almost laughed when, with a strange insouciance, a little black dog trotted around the corner and looked up at him. The fact that, smeared around its mouth, was something dark and glistening almost didn't register – until it reared up, impossibly, on its back legs and began to change shape. Like a blob of oil it began to flow, forepaws extending into long, ridged claws, spines extending back from its wrists. Its perky ears were subsumed back into its body as its fur smoothed over, as if it couldn't be bothered keeping up the pretence

that it was just a terrier any more.

The thing sprang on powerful, muscled legs, leaping through the air as if drawn magnetically towards him. Without thinking, Michael swung the pan, clumsily. It connected with a dull clang, sending the thing spinning across the room. It hit the edge of the bench and dropped to the floor, its limbs all over the place. But within seconds it began to move again, pulling itself back together and raising itself up. It kept itself low to the floor, scuttling sideways like a glossy black crab; and its icy blue eyes glistened as it prepared to spring again.

Chapter Twenty

The creature which had, not a few seconds ago, been a fluffy, black Scottie dog growled and spat like sizzling bacon. Its short, powerful legs tensed as it fixed Michael with its eyes.

But before it could launch itself at him again, Michael leaped forwards and dropped the pan over it, the noise ringing in his ears. Without a moment's hesitation, he stepped up onto it, feeling it banging against the metal, shifting under his feet. He knew that the moment he stepped down, the creature would be free. But then he noticed that the lowest shelf under the workbenches was almost exactly the same height as the pan.

Putting one foot back on the floor, he slid the pan and its captive under the shelf where it rattled and clattered, trapped and angry. Michael felt a cold sweat break out across his body as he stepped away from it, only then noticing a shadow falling across him from the doorway.

He turned to see another of the knobbly orange creatures, a gun in its slender fingers.

Reflexively he stepped to the side and chopped downwards and away from him, feeling the thin arm crack under the blow.

The creature squealed a high, shrill squeal and the gun dropped to the floor, skittering away across the tiles. For a moment, Michael saw pure, unadulterated outrage in the creature's much-too-human eyes – before he launched an uppercut that threw the thing into the doorframe.

With nothing more than a thin moan, it slid to the floor and lay still, ungainly limbs splayed out like a broken scarecrow.

'Ace!'

The voice was low and urgent – and right outside the door.

'Michael!' Ace rushed to the door, pushing Sooal out of the way. She slammed her palms against it. 'Michael, we're in here!'

Moments later they heard the sound of the old, rusted key turning in the lock and the door opened – Michael was standing there, the Annarene's gun in his hand. His face was pale, and it took Ace a few moments to realise that he was trying not to look down at the blackened bodies around his feet. Sooal stepped forwards but Michael waved him back with the gun.

'Come on Ace,' he said darkly and paused. 'Where's the Doctor?'

Ace turned to find the Doctor right behind her, his eyes oddly unfocussed, staring straight past her and Michael. He seemed to be muttering to himself. She followed his gaze, but there was nothing there. *Oh no*, she thought. *He's having a relapse.*

'The transmat,' he said distantly. 'We have to get to it.'

Ace nodded, frowning at Michael, as the Doctor stepped past her and headed into the laboratory.

Cautiously, Michael waved Sooal through: he'd rather have the slimy little creep where he could see him. They followed the Doctor. Through the high windows, Michael could see the cool blue light of dawn.

In the Orkneys, Ace stood on the beach, trying to keep the weight off her damaged knee. She fished in her jacket pocket, pulled out her torch, and squinted out to sea. She wanted some warmth, a cup of tea. But most of all, she just wanted a hug.

'What are you doing?' hissed Ace as the Doctor swung aside the block of Bakelite switches that covered the transmat controls.

Was he planning on them all going through the transmat and switching it off from the other side, leaving the Annarene trapped here? Good idea – only then *they'd* be trapped on the other side. The Doctor ignored her, his lips still moving. It looked like he was repeating a number – a long number – over and over again.

'Drop the weapon,' came a musical voice from the foot of the stairs.

Ace spun around to see the other Annarene and the tweedy woman, with a bag over her shoulder, aiming a gun at them. ‘And distance yourself from the controls,’ it added, jerking the gun at the Doctor.

Michael paused briefly before letting the Annarene’s gun fall to the tiles.

‘I suppose,’ the Doctor said grimly, ‘that it’s a waste of time telling you that you really shouldn’t do this?’

The male Annarene inclined its head to one side, its eyes glinting red and orange. ‘Of course,’ it replied.

‘Then I won’t bother,’ answered the Doctor. He closed his eyes momentarily, his brow furrowing.

What was wrong with him? wondered Ace. Was it just a hangover from the effects of Sooal’s machine? Or was there something else wrong with him? She placed a hand on his arm.

‘Professor...?’

He waved her away, taking a breath and straightening up.

‘After all you have done to cause interference with our plans,’ the Annarene said, ‘it must be particularly galling to you to know that in a few hours, we will begin our conquest of this world.’ The Annarene raised a slender hand, almost gracefully, and made a short, sharp gesture to Sooal who stepped forwards.

‘Activate the transmat,’ it ordered.

Sooal glanced at Ace and the Doctor and gave a tiny, smug smile. Ace had to stop herself from punching him.

‘He’ll betray you,’ was all she could think of to say to the Annarene as Sooal crossed to the control panel. The Annarene observed her coldly and said nothing as Sooal activated the trans-mat. There was a brief, almost-not-there shimmering of air in the centre of the room. Sooal returned to stand alongside the Annarene.

‘He betrayed the Tulks, and he’ll betray you too,’ Ace repeated.

‘We have witnessed his duplicity,’ the female Annarene said.

‘We will not be so easily fooled.’ She angled her head towards Sooal. ‘And he would not be stupid enough to consider subjecting us to

betrayal. Would you?’

Sooal said nothing, but it was clear from the way he couldn’t hold the Annarene’s gaze that such thoughts were already twitching in his nasty little head. Ace wondered why she cared: if Sooal was going to double-cross them, let him. She looked towards the door as the third Annarene entered the room; the one that had been guarding them that Michael had knocked out, its arm hanging limply at its side.

At her side, the Doctor staggered, and she rushed to support him. Again, he waved her away, his face tight and intense. ‘And how exactly do you intend to get your grubby little claws on the weapons?’ he asked through gritted teeth. ‘I take it you’ll use the last of the ship’s power to lift it from the water – then what?’

Sooal grinned. ‘The ship will generate a traction field, bring the sphere onto the island –’

‘– and then you’ll reattach the control sphere, input the codes and –’ interrupted the Doctor, as if he’d thought this all along.

‘– and this world will be ours,’ the Annarene finished coldly.

The Annarene still in the guise of the tweedy woman from the Orkneys reached into its bag and pulled out the control sphere that Ace remembered from John and Alexander’s boat.

She had a cold, stupid feeling in her chest: if she’d kept her mouth shut, they might not have found it. The Doctor nodded, glancing at the pewter sphere, held firmly in the Annarene’s pudgy, pale fingers.

Ace turned as she heard footsteps on the stairs – shuffling, uncertain footsteps. The Annarene followed her gaze: standing in the doorway were Jessie and Connie.

Ace threw a worried look at the Doctor. ‘I don’t think you should be here,’ she said to them. ‘Just turn around and go back upstairs - we’ll be up to see you soon.’

But the two of them were too busy staring at the Annarene, and Ace felt a pang of sympathy for them: as if having Alzheimer’s disease wasn’t enough, the last couple of days had seen them wired up to a computer, sent through a transmat and generally terrified out of their wits. And now, to cap it all, they were faced with two orange stick-insects the size of humans.

Dear God, she thought. *This was enough to push anyone over the edge.*

Ace was only relieved they hadn't used the other stairs: the sight of a dozen charred bodies piled up in the kitchen would have had them screaming in seconds.

'I don't think so,' Jessie said slowly, enunciating every word dearly as though in a village drama society production of *The Mousetrap*. 'We are here on the instructions of the Annarene High Council to arrest and detain you for crimes against the Protectorate.'

Ace felt as if her heart had stopped. The Annarene glanced at each other, their heads snapping from side to side sharply. She saw the mouth of the male open and close soundlessly.

'Professor! They're Annarene! Good Annarene!' she cried triumphantly.

Before anyone else could react, Michael launched himself at one of the Annarene. In a sprawl of limbs, it went down, clattering against the floor like a pile of dry sticks, its arms thrown up to protect itself. She heard Michael shout in pain as its barbed body scratched against him. And before Ace could even think of going for one of the others, it was moving across the floor, faster than she could ever have imagined – considering that she'd only ever seen their slow, ponderous movements in the fleshsuits. And right behind it was Sooal.

'Stop them!' Ace shouted to no one in particular, suddenly realising that if anyone was going to stop them, it would have to be her. Once they were through the transmat, it'd be too late: they'd turn it off from the other side and they'd be beyond reach. Almost without thinking, she threw herself at the fugitives, only to find herself tangled up with the Doctor, who'd taken a step forward. In a deft movement, as two of the Annarene and Sooal sprinted for the transmat point, he reached out and snatched the control sphere from the fleshsuited Annarene's hands. She whirled, surprised, and gave a tiny, clicking gasp. Behind her, her companion stepped silently through the transmat.

'I'll take that, thank you!' said the Doctor. And with that, he tossed it over his shoulder to Ace, who caught it perfectly. Then he took a step forward and gave Sooal a hefty shove in the chest.

Ace almost laughed at the startled expression on his face as he staggered backwards into the female Annarene, and the two of them tumbled, silently, through the open transmat and vanished.

Behind her, Ace heard Michael shout ‘Oi!’ and felt herself pushed aside by thin, bony fingers: she cannoned into the Doctor, still managing to keep a hold of the control sphere, as the last Annarene thrust her aside and headed for the open transmat. It didn’t - even notice that she had the control sphere.

The Doctor wobbled on his feet as the Annarene leaped through the air and disappeared – and with a long, low sigh, he collapsed to the floor. His hat rolled from his head, and something sparkly and metallic fell from it.

The room was suddenly deathly quiet.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was like falling into thick, green treacle.

A wave of cold deadness swept through his body as Sooal tumbled backwards through the transmat. Around him shimmered a coruscating haze of blue which died within seconds. He tried to turn his head, but nothing happened. In front of him, through a pale, phosphorescent corona, he saw the unmistakable silhouette of the Annarene – the one that the Doctor had pushed through after him, moving ever slower towards him until it, too, froze, suspended in space.

And as the light died, Sooal saw, ranged around him, the sullen, patient outlines of crates, boxes, racks of weapons; gaunt, unknown devices stood silent, metal arms clasped to their chests like sleeping insects, all limned in ghostly green.

The iron fist that gripped him brought every particle in his body to a standstill and the darkness folded in on him. And finally, despairingly, he knew where he was.

By the time the Doctor muzzily regained consciousness, Ace’s gentle patting of his face had turned into full-on slapping. He shooed her away with his hand.

‘Professor! What’s happening – they’ve not come back! We have to get after them!’

‘What? Who haven’t... oh, yes, yes.’ He sat up, shakily, helped by Ace and Michael, clasping his hat to his head. He looked round the solicitous crowd, gathered around him like gawpers at a car crash.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘Very, thank you,’ replied Ace. ‘Now shouldn’t we be going after them?’

He pulled the control sphere from Ace’s hand and confidently tossed it into the air a couple of times. On the third, she snatched it from him, almost petulantly. ‘Why haven’t they come back for it?’ Her face suddenly fell. ‘Don’t tell me – they’ve got some other way of opening the stasis chamber...’

‘If they have,’ replied the Doctor, rising to his feet unsteadily, ‘then it’s not going to do them much good. Not where they’ve gone.’

‘They’re not on board the spaceship, then?’

The Doctor twinkled at her and took the control sphere back from her, pocketing it neatly. ‘Well they would be – if I’d been doing what they thought I was doing when they caught me doing it.’

‘Uh?’

‘So where are they?’ asked Michael cautiously. ‘Sent them back home, have you, back into outer space?’

Ace glanced over at Connie and Jessie, standing, hand in hand, watching the proceedings in a very good imitation of total bafflement.

‘Well, if home is where the heart is, then you could say that, yes.’ ‘You’re doing it again,’ Ace warned him. ‘Subtitles in English for the hard-of-thinking please.’

The Doctor took a deep breath and drew himself up, obviously relishing the fact that all eyes and ears were on him.

‘What was the thing that they all coveted, above anything else?’

‘Decent dress sense?’ suggested Ace. ‘A nice tan for Sooal?’

‘The weapons in the stasis chamber,’ said Michael suddenly

‘You’ve sent them into the stasis chamber!’

‘Give the man a banana!’ the Doctor beamed.

‘But how?’ Ace asked. ‘I thought that was the whole point of the stasis chamber – the perfect safety deposit box. Nothing could get in and

nothing could get out.'

'Well,' the Doctor gave a modest little bow, 'that's the theory, of course. But that's what Sooal's little science project on board the ship was all about. Whilst he was working on reviving the Tulks' memories for the codes to the stasis chamber, he wasn't stupid – or naive – enough to assume that they would hand them over to him without an argument. And, of course, he had to take into account their ages, and the fact that one of them might die before he gave them their memories back. So he set up the parallel processor. He linked human minds together to form probably the most powerful computer this planet's ever seen.

When I was in there –' he frowned at the memory '– I saw what he was up to: it was a rather crude brute force effort to analyse the cycling frequency of the stasis chamber. Ingenious, but a heavy-handed way of being able to reach into the stasis chamber and take out what he wanted. But by the time I'd finished the calculations for him – not that I intended to –' he added hastily,

'he'd revived most of the Tulks and thought he should get the codes from them anyway, just as a backup in case the parallel processor hadn't come up with the right frequency. That's what I was doing with the transmat control – adjusting the frequency, setting it to home in on the stasis chamber.'

'So when we thought you were just activating the transmat,'

Michael said, 'you were setting it to send them *into* the stasis chamber?'

'Neat!' Ace said with admiration. 'But why grab the control sphere off them before they went? Why not let them take it with them and trap that in there, too?'

'Because in the fraction of a second that it took to actually pass through the transmat, the maintenance signal from the control sphere would have been cut off, and the security routines on the stasis chamber would have cut in.'

'And?'

The Doctor leaned close in to Ace. 'And *bang!*' he said softly.

Ace flinched. 'Taking most of Scotland with it, I should imagine.'

A safety feature to prevent people from simply destroying the control sphere to gain access. I rather suspect that none of them thought of this, otherwise they wouldn't have been taking it with them,' he added.

'Will they feel anything?' she asked curiously.

The Doctor pulled a face. 'Not for long, I imagine. Opening the transmat into the stasis chamber will probably give them a few seconds of sensory awareness. After that... just darkness, Ace.'

'So what about them?' Ace tipped her head in the direction of Connie and Jessie. 'Bit of luck them arriving when they did - although a few hours earlier would have been nice.'

Ace looked back at the Doctor, who was wincing, his eyes deliberately trying to avoid hers.

'What?' she asked. 'What's going on...?'

'I'm sorry Ace,' he said sheepishly. 'They're not actually Annarene.'

'Then why did they say they were?'

The Doctor gave a sigh. 'I'd originally intended for them to come and rescue us. Then when Michael here kindly got us out and I realised I could direct the transmat into the stasis chamber, I knew that I had to find some way to panic Sooal and the Annarene into jumping through the transmat without checking the settings.' He reached down and picked up the silvery hairnet that had fallen from under his hat when he'd collapsed. He turned it over in his hands. 'I cobbled this together from the implant I removed from Joyce – it's –'

'I know what it is,' Ace said hotly, realisation dawning on her. 'It's the thing that connected her up to the computers on board the ship, isn't it?'

He nodded.

'And Connie and Jessie still have theirs in their heads, don't they?'

He nodded again. 'I'm sorry Ace,' he said again. 'It was the only thing I could think of. I had to panic them. I couldn't take the chance that they'd check the transmat settings.'

'Hello?' interjected Michael. 'Us normal people are still here, you

know.' He looked at Ace, eyebrows raised.

'Ask him,' she spat, and turned away from the Doctor.

'While we were locked in the storeroom,' the Doctor explained, his eyes on Ace as she crossed to Jessie and Connie and began reassuring them, 'I used this to forge a temporary mental link to Connie and Jessie.' He twirled the silver mesh in his fingers. 'A bit of a strain, but it was my only option. I asked them to do a bit of play-acting for me – which they did marvellously.' He turned to the two ladies, trying hard to be cheery and matter-of-fact about the whole business. But Ace – at whom, she knew, his jollity was really directed – sullenly ignored him. His face fell.

'So they're not Annarene at all?' Michael asked. The Doctor shook his head.

'No, just two very game ladies – who've probably saved your planet from slavery. Now... who's for tea?'

The sky was pale grey, the morning was cold and wet, and in the Orkneys, Ace was fishing about in her rucksack, wincing as she accidentally put her weight onto her damaged knee. She found a pen whilst Alexander searched amongst the bits and pieces left around the camp and found a blank envelope. He handed it to her, mystified.

'You do realise,' he reminded her as she stuck down the flap and began to scribble on the back, 'that it's going to be Friday before that's even collected by the supply boat. And then it's got to find its way to the Doctor.'

'Trust me,' Ace said, signing her name with a flourish and an exclamation mark. She pressed it into his hand. 'Can you add the longitude and latitude of the beach when you get back to the boat?'

Alexander nodded as he read the card: *Wish you were here.*

Now! Love, Ace! He noted she'd added the date and time (about an hour from now, he realised) at the bottom. The front bore the address of a post office box in London.

'And promise me,' she said, 'that whatever happens, you'll make sure this card goes. Even if the Doctor turns up before you get chance to post it, *you have to post it.*'

The intensity in those last few words surprised Alexander, but he

nodded. He put his hand on her arm as she tucked the pen back into her rucksack. ‘What was it, then? That thing last night?’ He’d told Ace about the creature that had come aboard the boat; about how he and John had dived overboard; and about how, when they’d heard the thing splash back into the water they’d clambered aboard, two miserable, drowned rats, to find that the cabin had been torn apart – and the object that John had brought up gone.

‘I’ve got a horrible feeling that we know it better as Scottie Dog,’ she said. ‘It sounds like the thing that killed Megan.’ She patted her pockets, checking that she had everything. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘I’ll come and see you off.’

‘See me off?’

Ace nodded. ‘Trust me. You go back to the boat and I’ll wait for the Doctor.’

‘But it could be days or weeks before he –’

‘I said trust me. OK?’

‘You really are a nutter, aren’t you?’

‘Probably. Now come on.’

He shrugged, shaking his head.

Ace checked her watch and glanced out at the boat, bobbing away gently in a sea that somehow seemed brighter and gentler than it had when she’d arrived. The sky was clouding over again and she still felt terribly tired. Her knee whinged silently at her.

‘One thing,’ Alexander said, stepping into the dinghy. ‘You never did tell me your name. Your real name.’

She paused. ‘Dorothy – and you tell anyone and you’re dead.’ She grimaced at him. He was sinning.

‘Dorothy? Dorothy as in *The Wizard of Oz* –’

‘Yes, thank you for reminding me. You can probably guess what my middle name is too, can’t you? Now go on, get lost!’

Ace sat on the beach, feeling the pebbles digging into her backside. From out of the air, struggling to be heard over the wind, came a familiar noise. She turned to see the reassuring shape of the TARDIS

as it faded into solidity on a rocky promontory that jutted out into the sea. The air around her thickened with static, as if the TARDIS was drawing the mysterious energies from the ocean floor towards itself. Eye-aching white ropes of lightning danced around its roof for a moment before flickering out.

Ace checked her watch, picked up her rucksack, and headed for home. She paused on the threshold of the TARDIS and looked back at the boat. Was she imagining it, or did it look like there were other figures on the deck? She squinted, shading her eyes against the morning sun. What if the tweedies had accomplices? Could someone else have come through the transmat, other liftmen sent by Sooal? She couldn't go now; she couldn't leave John and Alexander to face them alone.

From inside the TARDIS, she heard the Doctor's impatient, oddly petulant voice, calling her.

'I can't go yet,' she called back.

'Ace! Come inside. Now.'

She felt herself bristling at his tone and stepped in, trying to keep her weight off her throbbing knee. 'I can't go yet,' she said again.

'Yes you can,' he replied sharply.

'But John and Alexander –'

'There's no time,' the Doctor said sharply, his hands poised on the TARDIS' controls. His face was concerned, preoccupied.

He glanced over at the doors to the TARDIS' interior, and she saw that he'd wedged the chair against them, his brown jacket hanging over the back. What was he –

It was as if someone had slapped her face. She felt the whole world – the interior of the TARDIS, the island on which it stood

-rushing away from her, like that trick they do in films with a zoom lens. She looked back at the Doctor as the doors closed behind her. Before she could tell him to open them again, the TARDIS dematerialised.

'Quickly, Ace,' he said. 'I need to know exactly when it was that we first arrived in Muirbridge.'

‘Why?’ She was still trying to fit together the pieces of everything that was happening around her. She was seeing herself from half a dozen different angles, and couldn’t cobble them together to work out the whole picture. ‘We’ve already been there – you know when we arrived.’

‘ You’ve already been there,’ he said, not meeting her eyes as he fiddled and fiddled with the console. ‘Joyce didn’t write the date on her card to me, and the postmark was smudged. I picked up *your* card from Countess Gallowglass at the same time I collected hers. That’s what I couldn’t show you in London. It was too big a coincidence that you’d sent one to me from the Orkneys whilst Joyce’s came from Dumfries.’ He glared at her, and Ace knew what his expression was – and where she’d seen it before. It was anger and outrage, sheer outrage – that someone else should be manipulating *him*. The countless times when *he*’d been the one to know what was happening, the one with the privileged viewpoint of knowing what was going to come next and being able to lord it over his companions because of it, the simple fact that *someone else* knew more than he did was doing his head in. If she hadn’t caught the darkness in his eyes and the clenched set of his jaw, she would have laughed.

And the last time she’d seen that look had been... after he’d barricaded her out of the console room, sent her on that stupid errand to fetch that stupid book from the TARDIS library.

When he’d finally let her in, he’d worn that exact same look.

Again, Ace glanced at the door, at the chair so expertly wedged under the handles.

Someone hammered on the door.

‘It’s me,’ she whispered, turning to the Doctor. ‘That’s *me* out there, isn’t it?’

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Doctor ignored her. ‘Ace, I need to know. When did we originally arrive in Muirbridge?’

Her head felt thick with nonsense, with the sheer irrationality of it all: here she was, in the TARDIS’s console room; and *there* she was, banging on the door, trying to get in. And she’d thought some alien had hijacked the TARDIS, persuaded the Doctor to do something so secret and so important that he couldn’t tell her about it. And all

along it was her. Did her own voice really sound so whiny, so petulant? She caught his glare. ‘Er, two days ago.

Saturday, I think. About 8am.’

He didn’t look up, he didn’t thank her. He set about typing the coordinates in. Then she remembered John and Alexander and the intruders on their boat. ‘But I have to go back to John and –’

He cut her off with a sharp wave. ‘I can’t know Ace. I can’t know anything that’s happened to you. Remember: none of it has happened to me yet.’ He finally looked at her, his eyes full of... something she couldn’t describe, some emotion that maybe she could never understand. Perhaps something that came with being a Time Lord, a deep sadness, wired into his very being.

Maybe she was just getting the tiniest taste of what it was like to be *him*.

The hammering on the door increased, and she could hear herself shouting.

‘I need to know where to drop you off first, Ace.’

‘Muirbridge, I guess. I mean, I got to the Orkneys through –’

‘I said no, Ace! Don’t tell me.’ He looked back at the console. ‘Muirbridge it is.’

With a subdued, almost vengeful stab at the controls, he finished programming their destination. She heard the change in the pitch of the TARDIS’s sound. The Doctor crossed to the internal doors, and began reasoning with the other Ace – the one now wondering what kind of danger the Doctor had got himself into. The Doctor.. the *other* Doctor. She’d almost forgotten.

Megan had said that he was dying, wired up to the computer aboard the ship. That had been yesterday. By now he could be dead. She looked at him again as he tried to placate the other Ace (she couldn’t think of her as being *her*). The Doctor could be dead – and yet here and now at the same time. But this here-and-now Doctor was *before* the Doctor that might now be dead.

Bloody hell. In twenty years time, she thought, I’ll be in therapy because of all this.

If the Doctor dropped her back in Muirbridge now – the real now, the now where she'd left John and Alexander – then it would all be over. The Doctor would be dead. The fact that he was here and now didn't prove anything: this Doctor was from the past. The one back in Muirbridge could already be dead. She couldn't let that happen.

As if she were on autopilot she crossed to the controls behind the Doctor's back and saw the display that told her the TARDIS was travelling in space, but not in time. With a few quick, inexpert strokes, she'd done what she knew was wrong; and at the same time what she knew she couldn't *not* do.

By the time the Doctor turned round, she was back in place, trying desperately to work out how far back in time her button-pressing would send her: it was either 20 hours or two days – she hadn't had time to check, properly. The thought occurred to her that she could equally well be sending herself back two years or 200. The sound of the TARDIS's materialisation filled the air.

'I'll see you in a few minutes,' he said, glancing towards the barricaded door.

Ace could tell he was making an effort at levity, as if he'd realised that his discomfort at the situation wasn't her fault and was trying to make up for his snippiness.

Sorry, she thought ruefully, would have been a lot easier. But considering what she'd just done, she had no right to whinge.

With a thump, the TARDIS materialised and the Doctor opened the door for her.

'Ace,' he said gently as she made to leave. 'Being a Time Lord isn't all jam and scones.'

She grinned awkwardly and stepped out – feeling even more guilty than she'd been when she'd reprogrammed the TARDIS.

The heather was soft beneath her feet, the air fresh and cool – even if her knee did feel like it had been hammered with a steak tenderiser.

She stared down at Muirbridge and didn't look back as the TARDIS and the Doctor and Ace vanished. *Deja vu? Been there, done that, got the T-shirt.* Now, if she'd worked it out right, she'd better get her head

down quickly. There'd be another TARDIS along in a minute.

Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor crossed to the interior doors and dislodged the chair. Ace stormed in.

'So?'

'Ace, please, there really isn't time for this.'

'You've got time to land the TARDIS, let some stranger in, have a secret little heart-to-heart and then drop him off somewhere, and you haven't got time to tell me what's going on?' 'It's not that I don't want to tell you. I *can't*.' His face looked genuinely pained, but Ace was too angry to take any notice of his distress.

'Are you being threatened? Is that it?' She looked around the room, as if expecting to find someone crouched behind the control console, pointing a gun at him. But there was no one there. She looked at him carefully, wondering whether he'd been possessed by some alien force, or replaced with a bodysnatcher-type replica. But he was the same little man that she'd just returned from the future with.

Like a waiter trying to find the right way to take the order from an arguing couple, Michael hovered around the periphery of Ace and the Doctor's sullen silence. He looked tired and drained, she just looked well pissed-off. He caught her eye and she sighed heavily and folded her arms. In the background, Connie and Jessie were fussing around the Doctor, the events of the last half hour apparently forgotten by them as they offered to make him yet another cup of tea. Connie's sudden sharpness was unnerving and she was taking charge of Jessie with, Michael suspected, more than an element of overcompensation.

'I'm not going to say it,' Michael ventured, turning to Ace.

She glowered at him. 'Well don't, then.'

He patted his pockets and found a crumpled pack of fags with one bent, torn, sorry specimen inside. He ripped off the filter, stuck the cigarette in his mouth and lit it as Ace flicked a contemptuous glance back at the Doctor. 'Were you being straight yesterday when you told me you'd come back in time a couple of days?'

Ace rubbed her eyes tiredly. 'The Doctor's not the only one who can go mucking about with time, you know. While I've been rescuing the

Doctor, getting shot at by the Tulks, getting locked up and rescued, I've also been up in the Orkneys, running from a psychopathic care assistant, duplicate tweedies and another of those.' She gestured at the pan on the floor under which the Landine seemed to have gone to sleep now that its masters were gone.

'I'm supposed to be following this, aren't I?' Michael said.

'Nah, it's time travel. If you try to follow it all, you end up as loopy as him.' She cast her eyes in the Doctor's direction.

'And does he know about this?'

Ace nodded, and for the first time Michael saw a softening of her expression – and, maybe, just a trace of guilt.

'He rescued me from the Orkneys – oh, round about now, I expect, and brought me back here. Only I fiddled with the TARDIS settings when he wasn't looking – to give myself some more time to help him – and got him to drop me off just before we first arrived here, two days ago. Since then, I've been trying to avoid bumping into myself.'

'You said you thought you had a stalker? That was you?'

'Freaky, eh? I nearly ended up running into myself until the Doctor had a little word with me the other night. He gave me a telling off and told me to keep myself out of sight until the original "me" had gone to the Orkneys. Of course, then I had to sit down and work out all the things that had happened to me while I was here the first time that might be down to me – this me, that is. Making a bacon butty, whacking Megan with a pan when she nearly caught me in the cellar, a spot of breaking and entering – and the stalking, of course. It's weird how you imagine that you look and sound completely different to how you actually do.'

'What would have happened if you'd done something different?'

Ace shook her head, and stared at the pan on the floor.

'Maybe that's the whole point,' she said with a resigned smile.

'Maybe we can't do anything different – maybe we all think we've got free will, that we can change this and change that. And then, when it comes down to it, we just do what has to be done to make it come out all right.'

Michael smiled gently. *We just do what has to be done.* Too right we do.

It was like some kind of bizarre family reunion: Michael and herself along with Alexander and John. All of them on the boat.

The two boys had nearly thrown themselves over the side when the TARDIS had materialised in the galley – a precision bit of piloting that Ace felt owed more to the TARDIS than to the Doctor’s driving skills. Alexander’s face had been a picture as she’d squeezed herself out; John had looked as though he was going to hit her. And the appearance of the Doctor and Michael out of the relatively tiny confines of a police box had set Alexander swearing like she’d never heard him swear before.

Only Joyce’s decision to stay with her mum spoiled the full hand.

Michael had tried to persuade her to come along with them to see everything wrapped up, but despite the obvious temptation, she knew where her priorities lay.

So here they were, edgy and awkward on deck, trying to avoid the handrail – and each other.

‘So you two still sulking?’ asked Michael, sidling up to Ace.

She glanced along the boat at the diminutive form of the man in the deckchair, his feet up on the handrail like nothing had happened, hat perched cockily on the back of his head.

‘Just a small matter of a broken promise or two,’ Ace muttered.

‘His or yours?’

Ace wasn’t sure she could answer. He’d promised to stop using people, pushing them about like pawns on a chessboard; and then he’d gone and deliberately – *deliberately* – tricked Connie and Jessie into coming downstairs and play-acting for him. *Two old ladies, for God’s sake.* Yeah, sure, she’d been a bit sneaky, altering the TARDIS’ controls to take her back in time. But it wasn’t the same: she hadn’t put two old women in danger, just so that some grand, secret plan could smoothly swing into operation.

He hadn’t learned a thing, had he?

Ace kicked petulantly at the base of one of the handrail poles and peered over. Michael followed her gaze. It was weird to think that,

frozen in time, deep beneath them were Sooal and the Annarene, trapped there in a long, unending *now*. The power supply, the Doctor had assured them, would last for ten thousand years. Maybe, a hundred centuries from now, the power would fail, the stasis sphere would cut out, and the three of them would suddenly be under forty yards of water, as if they'd beamed straight into it from the transmat. Drowned rats.

'Oi! Dorothy!'

Ace whirled around to see Alexander smiling at her. He threw himself at her in a bear hug, lifting her feet off the deck and whirling her around.

'I didn't think we'd see you again,' he said as he let her go.

As she opened her mouth, he raised his hand. 'And I don't want to know how that police box thing got in the ship. And before you start explaining – don't.' He paused and frowned, glancing past her, back out to sea... to the island. 'Hang on..' he said cautiously. 'If you're here, how come you're –'

It was Ace's turn to shush him. 'It's *The Wizard of Oz* all over again,' she smiled. 'It's either all a big con, or it's magic. I haven't decided which, yet.'

Alexander shook his head and suddenly remembered something: he rooted around in his pocket, and produced the envelope that Ace had asked him to post. 'Does this mean I don't have to post this, or that I do have to post this?'

She took it from him, her face creasing into a grin at the consequences that posting – or *not* posting – this simple little note could have, and slipped it into her pocket.

'Let me think about it,' she said slyly.

Michael stood silently behind the Doctor, drawing deeply on his cigarette as quietly as he could. And still he wasn't surprised when the little man said: 'If I tell you it's bad for your health, you'll probably accuse me of mothering you, won't you?'

'One mother's quite enough,' Michael replied, moving to stand at the Doctor's side.

'How is she?'

Michael gave a cautious shrug. ‘She’s taking it all well. I’m not sure who she’s blaming for Gran not being able to finish her treatment. Probably me for dragging her away.’

‘It wouldn’t have made any difference. Tell her that. I’m sure Doctor Menzies could operate the equipment in the treatment room, but this isn’t the time or the place.’

Michael turned and pulled a surprised face. ‘That’s not like you! Not tempted to give history a helping hand? Reshape the future? Give the world an early cure for Alzheimer’s? Save a few lives into the bargain?’

The Doctor continued to stare out to sea.

‘Sorry,’ Michael said after a few seconds. ‘A low shot.’

‘Better than your higher ones,’ answered the Doctor, rubbing his nose. Michael flicked the butt of his cigarette over the side of the boat to an accompanying tut from the Doctor.

‘Isn’t there enough rubbish out there?’

‘Talking of which – John says that Moby’s out as far and as deep as he can get it. D’you want him to cut the power?’

‘I think so. Once it’s turned off, the static shield I put in will make it totally inoperable as long as the stasis chamber’s still out there. As long as Moby and the control sphere sit quietly on the bottom, the chamber will stay sealed.’

‘Okey dokey.’ Michael turned to look for John.

‘And what about you?’ the Doctor asked before he could disappear. Michael spun on his heel.

‘What about me?’

The Doctor tipped his head back – his hat miraculously staying on, even upside-down. ‘Decided what you’re going to do?’

‘About UNIT?’ He sighed thoughtfully. ‘I’m doing what I have to do,’ he said – and then laughed at the pretentious way it came out. ‘I’m going to go back, face the music, and leave.

Court-martial, dishonourable discharge. Whatever.’

There was a long, long silence. One of those silences, thought Michael, that no one knows how to end. It was the Doctor who broke it.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'For everything. It's no excuse, I know; no justification.' He looked back out to sea. 'I wish you could see it through my eyes, Michael. If the Talichre hadn't been driven off. . well, we wouldn't be having this conversation now. Remind me to tell you about a planet I know. Anima Persis. Just one of the many worlds that the Talichre. . played with.' He paused.

Maybe for effect. Maybe he was really thinking. Michael doubted it. 'And I'm sorry about Andrew. I really am. I do what I do to make sure there are fewer Andrews. And fewer Michaels.'

Michael took a breath. 'His name was Andy,' he said. 'Not Andrew.'

The Doctor checked Ace's watch and shushed them all, pointing out to sea with his umbrella. The flat, grey ocean, glinting with sun-speckled highlights, spread out all around them. Suddenly, the water began bubbling a few hundred yards away, a mound of white froth, rising, like some vast kraken awakening.

And then, just as undramatically, it subsided.

'Well, that was exciting, wasn't it?' John said, deadpan and clearly unimpressed.

'You are sure we got everyone out of the ship, aren't you?'

Ace said worriedly. The Doctor threw her a 'trust me' look. 'I notice you made sure we left before we got swamped with awkward questions,' she said wryly as the others started wandering away. 'Although that woman that Joyce called Matron would have been enough to scare me away.' She stared out at the sea for a few moments, remembering the looks on the faces of the sleepers as they'd been awakened and the Doctor had removed their implants. Joyce had helped by telling the residents on the ship that it had all been part of their treatment, whilst the Doctor had been saying goodness only knows what to the ex-staff. It gave the term 'brain drain' a whole new meaning. 'So our work here is done, then?' she said finally, wondering if there were any other loose ends to tie up.

'Almost, Ace. Almost. Just the small matter of finding a certain someone a new family.' He glanced down at the cardboard box which sat by his chair. A miaowly squeak came from it.

‘How’d you do that?’ Ace asked. ‘Turn that *dog thing* into...

well, into a pussycat?’

‘Landines are programmed – genetically and chemically conditioned to be loyal to their owners, as well as being shapeshifters. And with the Arinarene gone, I was – obviously –

the natural choice. And cats are so much nicer than dogs, don’t you think?’ He reached down and wiggled his fingers through the gap in the box lid. Ace winced and raised a sceptical eyebrow. ‘If you think I’m sharing the TARDIS with *that...*’

‘No, no, no. It’s harmless now.’ He smiled at her. ‘I had a little word with it. Told it to forget its bad old ways. And I think I know just the new home for it.’

‘Well as long as I never see it again, that’s fine.’

‘No, Ace. You’ll never see it *again*. And talking of again – the trick with the postcard. ?’ He gave her a long look. ‘I think once is quite enough for that particular get-out-of-jail-free card, don’t you?’

Ace grinned. ‘Good though, wasn’t it?’

He raised an eyebrow as he reached down to gather up the cardboard box. ‘Come along, Ace. Time to be off, I think.’

Ace followed his gaze down the length of the deck: John and Alexander were trying their best to be civil to each other; Michael was gazing out to sea. She hoped she’d remember to tell him to call and say goodbye to Claire before he left – but she wasn’t making any promises to herself. They were consenting adults after all, old enough to sort their own love lives out; she didn’t always have to play Cupid.

‘What about Doctor Menzies and the treatments, and Norma and everything?’ she asked as they headed for the stairs down to where the TARDIS awaited them.

‘Oh, I’ve had a word with Doctor Menzies – told him that here and now isn’t the place or the time for a cure for Alzheimer’s. I think he understands. Actually, I think he’s quite relieved. I put all the stuff from the treatment room on board the ship – so apart from what he’s got in his head, I don’t think the web of time has much to worry about.’

'And Norma?'

He sighed. 'She's much better. Not cured, but much better. I think Joyce accepts that. She's staying on in Muirbridge for a couple of weeks before she takes her back down to London.'

There was an awkward pause.

'And what about us?' Ace asked.

He cocked his head on one side and gave her a wink. 'Butch and Sundance, Ace. Butch and Sundance.'

She slapped him playfully on the back of his head and his hat fell over his eyes. 'Call me Butch again, and you're dead.'

The Doctor played with the TARDIS's controls as Ace said proper goodbyes to everyone. Not really his sort of thing, he'd decided. He was still trying to work out whether he felt proud of Ace's ingenuity or annoyed at her duplicity. A little of both, he suspected.

But what really worried him, still, were the memories that Sooal's array had triggered. The one with Leela in the snow was fine, he remembered that one. But the other. He'd thought and thought and thought about it, but had got nowhere. He tried to write it off as something purely external, delusional, created by the probe's intrusion into his head. But he couldn't be sure. It had the taste of a memory, the scent of something real.

For the hundredth time, he closed his eyes and tried to take himself back there...

Away across the water, incongruously perched on the pebbled shore, was the familiar blue shape of the TARDIS.

Ace hadn't been able to resist the temptation, after all. With the Doctor waiting for her in the other TARDIS, she watched from the boat through binoculars – and smiled. He'd taken the TARDIS back in time a short while, when they'd come from Grystairs, to make sure that the signal from the control sphere overlapped itself and didn't make Scotland go boom. But his choice of exactly the right amount for her to witness her own departure from Kelsay seemed more than just a vague, temporal whim. Had the Doctor brought them to this point in time deliberately, just so she could see herself? It wouldn't surprise her.

A stunningly attractive young girl, Ace thought – despite her obvious limp – was hitching her rucksack onto her shoulder and stepping through the open door of the blue box. As she entered, she paused and looked back, straight at Ace. At herself. And then, as if she'd been ordered inside, she disappeared. Seconds later, the TARDIS faded away.

For once, thought Ace with a certain degree of smugness, I know more about where we're going than the Doctor does.

It was a rather nice feeling.

Epilogue

The rain poured down, forming glistening, smokey cones beneath the amber street lamps. Rivulets streamed down the walls of the buildings, overflowing from gutters and washing over windows.

In a Portakabin somewhere off the Mile End Road, surrounded by long-unopened lockup garages and scrap yards, a small, middle-aged woman was leafing through a card index, muttering to herself as she listened to what sounded like pebbles battering against the roof. As the thunder cracked overhead and rolled across the city, she gave a little shudder. With a tut, she closed the lid of the card index box and took out a huge bunch of keys from the pocket of her Chanel trouser suit. With the caution of six months' living and working in the less-than-salubrious environs of the Portakabin, she glanced round, checking that the blinds were down. Then she found one particular key, inserted it into a keyhole on the underside of the desk and turned it.

Above the surface of the desk, above the clutter of coffee-cups and paper-clips, bills and old envelopes, and a desk calendar that read November 4th 1976, a shimmering blue virtual display sprang up. With deft, practised strokes, she stabbed at the air, bringing up a stream of records. Quickly cross-referencing them, she set up a couple of new accounts for two clients had contacted her earlier that day. In a few minutes, she'd finished, and reached for her mug – when she heard a gentle tapping on the door.

Visitors at all hours of the day and night weren't unusual, so she wasn't unduly worried. She quickly turned off the display, pocketed the keys and crossed to the door. With a casual wave of her hand, she activated a concealed sensor in the doorframe, and the one-way door rippled to transparency. Outside, in the darkness and rain, there was

only... well, darkness and rain. No, wait: at the foot of the door, rapidly darkening in the downpour, was a cardboard box.

She deactivated the shield and cautiously unlocked the door.

Rain and wind lashed against her as she quickly stooped and lifted the box. For a moment, something inside it seemed to move, and she almost dropped it. But she managed to hold onto it and brought it inside, where she placed it on the seat of her typist's chair.

The box *wriggled*.

For a horrible moment, she imagined that she was going to be one of those women who discovered abandoned children on their doorsteps. The rain had stained and softened the top of the box where it was folded in on itself. She watched as whatever was inside the box began to nose its way out, pushing up the soggy cardboard.

It's a cat, she thought, with an odd thrill of excitement, as a faint meow came from inside the box; the nose and then head of a sleek, black cat poked out, blue eyes shining. She helped it from the box and cradled it against her bosom as it began to purr, rubbing up against her chin. Miss Gallowglass reached down with her free hand and opened the box. In the bottom, crumpled up where the cat had been sleeping on it, was a handwritten note.

Give this little orphan a good home, would you?

We all need a bit of mothering now and again.

The Doctor

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Mark Michalowski lives in Leeds.

Having dipped his toe into the murky waters of *Doctor Who* writing with the very last story in *Bernice Summerfield and the Dead Men Diaries*, wet his ankles with stories in the *Missing Pieces* and *Walking In Eternity* collections, he's finally jumped in up to his neck with this, his first novel. Whether he swims or drowns is up to YOU!

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